

Editorial

Which Big Story: The Da Vinci Code or the Bible?

GK. Chesterton once said that when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in anything. One example of this is surely Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* which has sold over 1.5 million copies in the UK and has been published in over forty languages. A film of the book is to appear in 2006 which will ensure continued interest and ever greater public awareness. The book is a good read; I enjoyed it on a long train journey and bought Brown's *Angels and Demons* to read on the return journey. The vital issue, though, is that in these days of increasing Biblical illiteracy many people are going to get their ideas of the gospel from such a book, and, without necessarily 'believing' it, are going to have their perceptions subtly formed by what it says. That is why I want to say something about it in this editorial.

It is easy to see the appeal of the book; the story is exciting, the characters believable enough and the settings vividly realised. It also appeals to many contemporary fears and concerns. There is the dislike of monolithic institutions; here it is the Roman Catholic Church. It celebrates the surge of female power and influence and in particular the place of Mary

Magdalene as the 'consort' of Jesus. It is not my purpose in this editorial to go through these and refute the wrong ideas. I would recommend an excellent book by the American New Testament scholar, Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking*.

What I am concerned with here is the great opportunity and challenge the publication of *The Da Vinci Code* has given us. It clearly has touched many nerves: not least people's desire for a big story, a grand narrative which can make sense of our lives. *The Da Vinci Code* purports to give that; sadly it is the wrong one. But we have the great narrative: the story of God's loving purposes from creation to New Creation, a story which exposes evil and sin fearlessly and yet offers hope. As preachers and teachers we have a God-given opportunity to do what the book does badly and to expound the greatest story of all. Here, surely, is an altar to an unknown God, and like Paul we must proclaim the living God who is the Creator, who sent his Son to die and rise again and will one day judge the world through him. There are six things I want to say:

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1. We must preach the whole Bible, giving due weight to each part.

— and helping people to see that it is a coherent story. Indeed the opening words of the Bible pose a question, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' is the uncompromising statement. Well, did he get it wrong? Is this present world with so much beauty and goodness and also so much ugliness and evil the final word? Unless we have a clear grasp of the big picture and the assurance of a new heaven and new earth then we do not have a gospel and we can offer nothing but platitudes.

As we preach the Bible, book by book, we need to fit passages into their evident context. This does not mean a summary of the Bible's plotline every time we preach, but it does mean that we will anchor our preaching in the

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ongoing history of salvation. To give one example: Esther will come to life when we compare the time references there to the Exodus story and find the implied question about whether the God of the Exodus is still able to save his people. When we further realise that behind the scenes Satan is also working to prevent the coming of the Messiah by the destruction of the chosen people, we see that an apparently marginal book is part of the great story and has much we need to learn. There is no part of the Bible that is not valuable, no part which is not preachable, and we need to commit ourselves once more to thorough preaching and teaching.

2. We must teach with passion and imagination.

Too much orthodox preaching is dead-ly dull and delivered in the manner of someone reading train timetables. We have often been guilty of robbing the gospel of its depths and resonances. 'Great is the mystery' says Paul; but we have often slid into a flat rationalism. Why did so many once flourishing churches in Europe and America sink into Unitarianism? It was because their faith degenerated into something small enough for human reason to cut down to size. The great life-giving truths of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the work of the Holy Spirit and the substitutionary atonement by which all other blessings come to us did not fit into their neat theological schemes.

You will understand that I am not advocating a vague sloppy mysticism but for an engagement with the living word which warms the heart as well as enlightens the mind.

We need to engage with imagination the varied literary genres of Scripture, not least with the dominant one, narrative. Biblical narrative is more than mere story but it is not less and we must examine such matters as plot, characterisation and the flow of the storyline if we are going to present it well. We must, in effect, live in that story ourselves. This means that the Bible must not simply be assumed but our priorities and vision must be dictated by it.

3. We need to proclaim the uniqueness of Christ.

The Da Vinci Code claims that the divinity of Jesus was created and propagated for political reasons at the council of Nicaea in 325. The assumption of the book was that he was indeed a remarkable prophet, but that he was mortal and that he married Mary Magdalene and has physical descendants alive today. We need to preach the Gospels and show how that Jesus as Lord is rooted in the New Testament and fulfills the Old Testament foreshadowings. Ulti-

mately we have no gospel unless we believe that in Jesus God has spoken finally, uniquely and authoritatively. We need to emphasise equally that he became one of us and is one of us still.

The uniqueness of Christ is vitally important for another contemporary debate: the one on penal substitution. This debate has been particularly ignited by the publication of Steve Chalke's book, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan 2004). Chalke has attacked the doctrine of penal substitution as inducing bigotry and self-righteousness and accusing those who believe and preach such a doctrine as being judgmental and condemning. We need not deny that such behaviour exists, but it is not related to a true biblical understanding of the centrality of Christ and the cross. Indeed it is precisely when we grasp that Christ and his death and resurrection are the heart of the biblical story that we find a truly biblical emphasis. God's anger with humanity's sin needs to be removed before the new heaven and new earth can be secured. Penal substitution tells us that the curse on creation will be removed, that the death of Christ has exhausted that curse in our place and the resurrection is a guarantee that there will be a new creation.

Moreover, if Christ is simply the prophet/teacher of *The Da Vinci Code* the Trinitarian basis of our faith collapses. The statement of Chalke that penal substitution teaches that 'God brought about the violent death of his Son' makes it look as if one party, God, inflicted suffering on another party, his Son. Rather, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit together plan the salvation of humanity and the cosmos. This is the message we need to proclaim with increasing clarity and conviction.

4. We need an informed understanding of the issues surrounding the canon of Scripture.

The Da Vinci Code sees the canon of the New Testament (it has little to say about the Old Testament) as part of the

conspiracy of Nicaea which divinized Jesus and excluded from the authoritative Scriptures the 'authentic' Gospels. These works such as the 'Gospel of Thomas', the 'Gospel of the Hebrews', the 'Gospel of Mary' and so on come from the second and third centuries after the New Testament books were already accepted as authoritative. Indeed we have a glimpse in 2 Peter 3: 16 of the formation of authoritative apostolic texts where Peter speaks of a collection of Paul's letters 'which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures'. By 180 Iranaeus, bishop of Lyons, spoke of the fourfold Gospel and cited Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and like other early teachers such as Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian stand in the line of the Apostles as they proclaim Jesus as truly God and truly human.

It is no accident that these rejected 'Gospels' destroy the big story by their failure to engage with the Old Testament. Thus their 'Jesus' is not the promised Messiah or coming King but a rootless and eccentric figure who is not the centre of God's purposes but simply a remarkable teacher. In *The Da Vinci Code* Leigh Teabing explains to Sophie Neveu that it was in fact Constantine who suppressed the Gospels about the 'human' Jesus and had a new Bible created. We need to preach and teach the Old Testament along with the New to show the full story and true significance of the Lord Jesus Christ and how the whole Bible bears witness to him.

Ultimately the question is not about the Bible but about God himself. Has God spoken and has he done so in a way which can lead us to saving knowledge of him? The whole canon as the written Word of God gives a faithful and complete witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word.

5. We need to put these emphases at the heart of our training of the next generation of preachers, teachers and other leaders.

There are many things those training

for ministry need to know: they must have and keep on developing their knowledge of systematic theology and church history. They need to understand the world we live in and its ever-changing culture. But none of these things will in themselves equip them to be effective ministers and give answers to the issues raised by *The Da Vinci Code*. We need pastors, teachers, evangelists, youth workers, student workers who are trained in and committed to training others in Bible ministry. Studies of post-modernism, 'doing church in the 21st century' and the like cannot replace, and may even divert attention away from, this essential task of helping people to read and communicate the Bible.

There is a danger of retreat in evangelical circles from this single-minded commitment to the proclamation of Scripture which, if not checked, will leave people totally unable to face the challenges from Da Vinci or elsewhere. Those in ministry need to recommit themselves to a fully Biblical emphasis and to training others to do this. This will mean being radical and sitting loose to much of what is regarded as denominational distinctives and a refusal to be overawed by the establishment. It will mean a commitment to working closely with all who share the vision and are committed to putting Word ministry at the heart of what they are doing.

It will mean good scholarship will be placed at the service of the church. It is essential that training is in the hands of those who are not only scholarly but who are committed to making the fruits of scholarship available to help others to understand Scripture. Part of the confusion caused by *The Da Vinci Code* is that so much of what is said appears to have a scholarly base, such as the matters I mentioned already about the Council of Nicaea and the Canon. Good biblical teaching will lead to informed and articulate faith and to good apologetics.

6. We need to rediscover eschatology.

The problem about *The Da Vinci Code* is that there is no real ending; it is episodic in the manner of a soap opera and there is no satisfying conclusion. It argues that since Jesus was an ordinary man he may have descendants now alive but plainly he will not return in glory to judge the living and the dead and usher in the new heaven and the new earth. This is the crunch point. There is a big story that needs to have a Last Day and that Day does not simply come as something tagged on at the end but as the climax to which the whole has been moving.

This is why I say we need to rediscover eschatology and that not as simply something tagged on at the end but the continual assurance that creation and history are going somewhere.

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With the coming of Christ we are in the last days. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament and in him all the purposes of God centre. He is the Christ who became one of us, died and rose again, sent the Spirit and will return to complete the great work of new creation. It is that Christ we need to preach and call people to repentance and faith.

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To proclaim this great story effectively will require from us not less than everything. Only by the indwelling Holy Spirit can we do it all. We need to recognize that we have a huge task of filling the country with our teaching, and working to see gospel-centred churches established. If *The Da Vinci Code* has given a further impetus in this direction we can only be thankful. But we should not need that to give us renewed vision; rather we need to renew our commitment to the Lord, to the gospel and to passing on the faith to coming generations.

Legalism and its Antidotes

Dominic Smart, Aberdeen

Deliverance is a wonderful thing. When a Christian is delivered from an oppressive burden that has weighed him or her down for years, then it's especially wonderful. For such deliverance brings release into the joy of the Lord. There's a sin which takes a peculiarly Christian form in churches. It is burdensome, lethally plausible and, tragically, it's rife. It would be one of my greatest delights if through my years of ministry believers and fellowships are delivered from it to the glory of God. It's legalism.

WHAT IS LEGALISM?

It's a sin. It always has been and always will be. Like all sins it causes others to suffer. So some of you reading this might be more sinned against than sinning: only you will know that. The indicators, sadly, will be guilt, pain and an inferiority complex that you somehow can't quite believe.

Legalism isn't a matter of having rules, structures, limits or instructions in our congregations or individual lives. While they can be overdone, and often are by people of a certain temperament, they are necessary for godly order in any fellowship: God has given many to us in the Scriptures. The opposite of legalism isn't lawlessness (antinomianism, as some like to call it), which is nothing more than anarchic

pride. Nobody is delivered into that. Christian freedom isn't freedom to do whatever you want: down here none of us is safe to be let loose with such a freedom; up there – well, we'll be different then!

Legalism is primarily a God-ward thing. It's a way of making and keeping yourself acceptable to God. From this flows the legalism that is directed towards one another. It's a way of scoring sanctity points in our fellowships, and exerting what one postmodernist called a 'truth regime' – it's about pride, power and control. It simultaneously glorifies man and 'unsecures' man. Thus its true opposites are grace and faith.

Yet it is so plausible. The need for order, structures and boundaries feeds our quest for control. Our very ability to keep some rules feeds our pride and gives us the impression that our relationship with God is somehow founded upon this ability. But in the same way, our inability to keep others feeds our despair, which in turn generates more rules and a more strenuous effort to keep them. Since laws and rules can be helpful, legalism seems to be on to a winner.

It often arises out of a good motive: to be holy. We don't want sin to rule over us, we don't want to grieve God or to stray from his path. And it

is a narrow path compared to the one that leads to destruction. So in order to avoid big sins we add rules to God's word – hedging sinful territory around with codes that are intended to keep us from it. It is the well-intentioned, keen and committed who are most prone to it. The half-hearted Christian couldn't really care enough to veer towards legalism (though he or she makes up for it with many other errors). It was the scribes, following good Ezra, who developed 'the traditions of men' which people preferred to the word of God: a preference that Jesus blasted in Mark 7.

But all this focuses the mind on self. It takes the mind and heart away from Christ, the Proper Man. It takes our faith away from his sufficiency and misplaces it upon ours. We live to achieve his approval; we forget that we are already alive and accepted in Christ. Ever so plausibly we are sold a different gospel: one that isn't really a gospel at all. And the desire not to sin in some big way can be little more than a mask to hide our lack of faith in Jesus, 'who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption'. (1Cor. 1: 30). Holiness is not a matter of living on eggshells with a God who is reserving judgement on us and might turn us away at any moment.

It really is a deadly false thing, this warped alternative, this lie, this all-pervasive and hideous distortion of Christian living – for at least eight reasons that I can think of. The biblical antidotes will follow.

1. Legalism cannot deal with sin. It is utterly powerless to deal with it in non-Christians and Christians alike. Law never reaches the well-spring of the heart; at best it merely curbs the behaviour of the flesh. It never changes a person's nature – it might persuade a man or woman of the need to change, but it cannot effect the change. It will never rob sin of the capacity to beset you.

More, it is useless against the tempter. No law ever defeated him, robbed him of his strength, plundered his domain, released his captives, broke his back. Law never cast him out, never rebuked him, never bound the strong man. It took God the Son, the cross and an empty grave to do these things.

Yet more, laws and rules can never yield forgiveness: They are the very written (or spoken, or in some churches subtly unspoken) code that a person breaks. Break it at one point – only one – and you've broken it as a whole. No law can cancel the code. No law can declare forgiveness; it can only declare offence, guilt and condemnation. With respect to sin's power, author and penalty, legalism is utterly powerless.

2. Legalism cannot bring us closer to God – precisely because it cannot deal with our sin and clear the obstacles that sin throws up between us and him. Our legalistic fellowships only multiply reasons for not ascending the hill of God – in them we are constantly constrained to cry 'Unclean hands, impure heart!' And because the keeping of the rules becomes the ground for acceptability with God and the means of access and approach to God, we stay away from the Saviour whose hands were clean for us, whose heart was pure for us, and who has already ascended the hill of God for us. Legalism keeps Christians and non-Christians alike away from God.

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3. It sends us in entirely the wrong directions as we progress through life. The mindset of legalism has four great products. Despair – you cannot keep the rules, and so your self-esteem plummets and your assurance of the Father's love evaporates from under your feet. Pride – you can keep some of the rules, and so you do think that you can keep yourself in the Father's good books and so your assurance becomes grounded on self's performance – performance related pay. Judgementalism – you constantly assess people according to the rules and are quick to look down on others on the basis of your negative assessment. Control – the desire to have people tow the line and conform to the regime – nowadays it's called spiritual abuse. Legalism never produces gracious and expansive souls, growing richer in compassion and wisdom as the years go by. You'd never run to a legalist with your moral failure, breakdown, temptation or depression, unless you're a masochist.

4. It's narrow-minded and sinfully boring. Under the guise of being holy legalism makes the narrow path narrower than God has made it. No non-Christian is going to turn from a life of happiness and apparent freedom to a restrictive, trussed up, dull and joyless life. It carries none of the natural winsomeness that Jesus had in his ministry. Most of the legalistic fellowships, organisations, groups or individuals that

I've had any contact with have been more or less negative, down on fun and narrow – you really want to say to these folk, 'Get a life'. God's creation isn't to be enjoyed; much of it is to be avoided, or else it's seen as a light distraction from the really serious matters of so-called theology. Music, theatre, cinema, art – are all probably sinful, so best avoid them. Nature is only useful as far as it has to do with the creation/evolution debate. Literature has to be endured if you really must do English at university. (And if you choose to, you place a question-mark over your faith.) Culture is what you separate yourself from in case it stains you. Admittedly, sex was designed by God but its existence is probably best denied by us on account of its dirtiness, apart from the necessities of reproduction. (Though secretly...) Intelligence and wit are frowned upon (out of envy). Joy is only a sense of relief that you've got the religious task done. As for holidays!

But the narrowness gets much worse – sinners aren't to be loved, they're to be evangelised and beyond that avoided lest they stain you too. If you can't have evangelistic contact, better to have as little as possible. People, in all their complexity and contradictions, aren't to be understood with compassion – they are to be told what to do – the objects not of love, but of expectations. Boring: seriously and sinfully boring. Boring in a way that diminishes the richness of humanity which is made to the glory of a never-boring, endlessly creative and staggeringly imaginative God.

5. Legalism encourages, even protects hypocrisy. How? Well, it provides masks for us to wear at church. We can wear the mask by keeping a sufficient number of the rules. You can look like a 'good' (i.e. conforming) Christian, while underneath you're an entirely different person. Beautiful but rare is the fellowship where the really important things are gauged as quickly, seriously and with the same discernment as the obvious, visible things. As

long as you keep up the appearances, defined as they are by the legalities, you can be a cruel husband, a tyrannical mother, a lousy employee, a pervert, the list goes on. Or you can just be hard-hearted, bitter, jealous, spiteful, as long as you smile the right way and look right and turn up at the right things. But since legalism is essentially a God-ward problem, the hypocrisy has a deeper and more pernicious dimension: we act with God. We needn't, of course. He knows all that there is to know, accepts us in Christ, and is resolved to present us perfect before his throne at the last. But it is one of the weaknesses of the legalist mind-set that it thinks that we must come to God strong – and we define strength; that we must come to him not needing help and we define the limits of helplessness. Who needs a great high priest who is able to sympathise with us in all our weaknesses, when we can with a few adept strokes of acting make ourselves sound strong? Who needs a Proper Man when we can do the proscribed life well enough ourselves. The mask-wearing stops us from coming to God in dependence upon him and it prevents us from ever really dealing with the things that the mask hides – or allowing God to deal with them. Does the legalist feel loved in his brokenness? Is she ever healed from the inner, hidden crippling injuries of sin? Tragically, not.

6. There's an irony about the sixth distortion. While on the surface legalism is deadly serious and is often a problem that arises precisely when individual Christians and fellowships or organisations are taking the call to holiness and commitment seriously, it ends up trivialising life with God. It fills life with rules that govern non-essentials. Does it really matter if your hair is longer than the fellowship regulations? Is that hat really virtuous (or sinful, depending on your fellowship and the hat!)? Is God actually that bothered by jeans? What if you just don't feel like lifting up your hands on the third re-

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peat of 'Shout to the Lord'? Legalism can introduce layers of conduct that fix our attention on things that the Bible rates as relatively unimportant if not downright trivial. It trips us up with mincing pedantries, when we should be running and dancing with joy in God.

The problem becomes acute in our fellowships when we equate being pedantic with being godly. By doing so we make such so-called godliness an impossibility for those with a more laid-back temperament. Don't get me wrong: it's not that being laid back is inherently virtuous, any more than being rule-dominated is inherently virtuous. It's when a fellowship is set up, in terms of its psychology and values, to portray godliness as something that's going to be unattainable by some simply because of their God-given temperament and personality, or by virtue of their biblical sense. There has to be an expansiveness in our Churches, among the formal and (perhaps more importantly) informal tone-setters, that gives breathing space and elbow room to those whose Creator has made to be 'laid back'. We can't force the Lord's children into clothes that just don't fit. The expansiveness comes, of course, from love. And there has to be a right-mindedness that allows people not to suffer fools gladly without being labelled as rebellious subversives who, since they don't fall down with awe be-

fore rule 48, para. 13, subsection d, are obviously not walking with the Lord.

But more than making us damagingly constrictive or ridiculously pedantic, legalism trivialises life at a deeper level. It shifts the focus of our attention onto something other than God himself. And since he is the highest, best and true focus of all his creation and especially his redeemed, it means that our focus is shifted onto something less than its true ground. Our motives and preoccupations change – no longer is our chief end to glorify God and enjoy him for ever; instead we do stuff for approval from the controllers. But compared to God, the controllers and the devil who lies behind the legalism, are trivial. Legalism always reduces life. The reduced life misses the point, which is to find joy in life-with-God: serving, worshipping (two sides of the same coin), resting in, growing in, learning from, loving and finding glad sufficiency and fullest satisfaction in God.

7. Legalism produces a false gospel; one that is, as the Scriptures say, no gospel at all. Why is it a false gospel that legalism presents and makes us live by? Because by it we seek to be justified on the basis of law, not faith. And whatever our pride, or the devil, or the fellowship might tell us, we will never accomplish what we seek. It's no gospel because it's bad news. It amounts to 'Do these things and you shall live; but by the way, you'll never be able to do them'. Now the setting of the teaching in Galatians is that a false gospel that relates to justification relates also to sanctification. Paul writes to Christians, not seekers. Legalists have cut in on believers; they have been bewitched, duped, deceived into another principle by which to live with God. Not only does legalism produce a false gospel message, by which sinners are called to save themselves by a good work called repentance, but it then couches the rest of the Christian life in terms of more works. As if we were saved (present and future) by good works, rather than for good works. The ground for our secu-

rity thus shifts from Christ – his finished work for us and his ever-living to intercede for us – to our good works. We are saved to serve – but not only to serve, and even the service is to be given in a certain way: resting by faith in Christ the perfect servant, and with joy. Paul reserves some of his strongest and least delicate language for people who do this in churches – read Galatians 5:11–12 to see what Paul wishes the circumcision teachers would go the whole way and do to themselves! Shocking!

8. Legalism robs God. This is the worst aspect of it, and the sum total of the previous seven. It is legalism's sin. It is this that makes it more than just a problem from which some personality types suffer. God, in his majesty and infinite glory, is glorified by our faith. By faith we say to him that we are insufficient and that he alone is sufficient to save and to keep us. Legalism inverts the biblical order of covenant, justification and law. Legalism robs God of the glory that is due to his name, the glory of the gospel of his redeeming grace in Christ, the glory of his tender and mercifully patient perseverance with us and the glory of the Spirit's sanctifying power. By legalities we rob God of his glory and place it upon ourselves. We assume a power to save and to keep; we usurp the Spirit's office; and we create a life that cannot feel the joy of the freedom of the children of God. No wonder the worship is so mind-bogglingly

lifeless. No wonder the legalist's soul never soars with praise. No wonder heaven never rings to the songs of the legalist's heart.

God is robbed of glory. In this is legalism's most hideous sin. And from this is God's most glorious and wonderful deliverance. Antidotes are marvellous when they work. The disease of legalism, to which the church has always been prone and which infects fellowships, movements, individuals and families, is unpleasant and even deadly. But legalism is not without its antidotes, and saints are not without their cure. The problem is ugly and the world that it creates is dark; but the antidotes are glorious and light and wonderful. They are not to be hurried over.

HOW CAN WE DEAL WITH LEGALISM?

The first seems the least likely – particularly to a legalist: a greater view of sin. The legalistic mind has too small a view of sin. It thinks that it can deal with sin with a few rules (more than a few, if they seem to be required: there's no shortage). But these rules are never going to deal with sin. There's nothing quite like an understanding of the depths of the impact and power of sin to awaken a Christian to his or her inability to deal with it themselves. But it was the classic mistake of the Scribes and Pharisees. Reduce righteousness to a technicality (getting the paperwork right) and you do the same with what it's set against: sin becomes a superficial problem, with no root in the heart. If it's all a matter of the details of behaviour, then you can solve it yourself with a few (hundred) rules. It's like taking a paracetamol for cancer.

But see what happens when you superficialize sin: you ignore its real corrupting power within and you actually end up protecting it. You give it a safe and untouched haven in the heart. The storms of law can rage on the outside, while the sinfulness of the heart

goes unchallenged, unmolested, strong. That's why some of the most legalistic people can be the worst, harbouring really wicked attitudes and practices. It's why you can strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. It's why you can have a whitewashed sepulchre.

What but the truth of God can penetrate the heart, expose pit of sinfulness, lay bare the nature as sinful, reveal the truth about us and our sin? What but the power of God can break the power of sin? What but the victory of Christ can free us from our captivity to sin? What but the life of God can overcome the deadliness of sin? Shake a rule-book at sin and Satan laughs in derision. Legalism should quake before the biblical teaching about sin. God in his grace has given us the truth about sin and it should be enough to drive us not to the rule-book, but to Christ.

Second, the holiness of God. Legalism can't touch sin; neither can it answer the holiness of God. I keep the house rules about clothing, what I can or can't do on the Lord's day, cinema, music, wine, attendances, witnessing, whatever; but maybe I don't love my neighbour as myself. So God, in all the infinite splendour of his holiness, who cannot look upon sin, who dwells in perfect light, who sees to the very depths of my soul and who knows every thought and word, thinks what? Do I fondly imagine that he weighs the 'good' bits which my rule-keeping has provided against my bad bits? And as he watches the scale tip down on the good side he declares me to be righteous in his sight? Is that how it works? We know that it is not so, but the legalist functions as if it were. This 'unholiness' of God – him being satisfied with a few ticks on our list; him being just a bigger version of us and not actually God – gives credibility to the effectiveness of the legalised life. But get one glimpse of the holiness of God, one tiny, brief glimpse, and any notion of personal adequacy shrivels, withered and scorched by the holiness that threatened to break out upon Israel

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at Sinai. See Isaiah in the Temple, the hosts of heaven in Revelation, and ask yourself whether such a feeble thing as our legalistic righteousness could last a moment before such a God. He is great and terrible in his holiness. He is to be feared and trusted, not negotiated with. The holiness of God should crush any confidence in the legalistic life. It's no way to live with our God.

I've known some legalists in my time, and the one thing that has never struck me about them is that they really know God in the way that brings silence and awestruck reverence. Except those for whom the legalism is driven by fear-without-trust; who have caught a glimpse of God's great and terrible holiness but have been driven on to try and meet it with more rule keeping. Reverence is there, but so is the wrong sort of fear: fear without trust.

The cures need to work together. So to the third cure – Grace. Grace to save the sinner and grace to keep the sinner saved. Grace to make us holy and grace to bring us to glory. And even as I write the word the sun comes out in my soul. (Writing about legalism is really hard writing. It makes me realise how all-permeating legalism's smog is – it becomes the air that some fellowships and Christians breathe, it gets in the clothes and the furniture, stains the décor, sits in the lungs, clouds every horizon.)

I want to look at some of the majestically glorious ways of God's grace shortly – how his grace cures legalism's disease as we are grasped by the truth: the Spirit's gracious regenerating act, Christ's act of grace in justifying us from all sin, the gracious work of God in sanctifying us and what it means to be in Christ. I also want to highlight those cures that come from the Lordship of Christ, which is perfectly liberating; and ask the question again about whose glory I live for.

But for now it's grace felt that I have in mind – like the warmth of the life-giving sun; like the sparkling exhilaration of the vast ocean, wave-break-

ing its delight over the laughing child; like a great swell of sanity and peace; like a resting, satisfied calm of perfect contentment. If one glimpse of the holiness of God can cure us of our self-trust, shouldn't it be that one moment in the world of grace should forever ruin us for the world of law? Doesn't even the sound of the word in your heart silence the legalistic whispers, the proscriptive command and control, the sombre disapprovals of the accountants of righteousness? What hope has legalism's whine before the booming glory of the grace of God?

Doesn't it make you want to read Hebrews to the Pharisees (and to the Pharisee within) and say "Come, see the mountain that you really do live on, for 'You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.' But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.'?"

Fourth, regeneration – the giving by the Spirit of the principal of life to those who were dead in their transgressions and sins – is a wonderfully humbling cure. A greater view of sin should convince us of our need of the work of God alone to free us from its captivity. Our struggles are futile – we are not spiritual Houdinis. Nowhere is this more clear than when we consider what makes us alive – and continue to

be alive. It never was, and never can be rule-keeping. Not even God's law could bring life – it was only ever given as a schoolmaster to lead us to the one who alone can give life. Of ourselves, we had no vitality for God to work upon with our co-operation. Only the life of God in the soul of man will do. But the mistake of the legalistic mind is to restrict the giving of life to our new birth. The doctrine of regeneration might focus on that, but the life we are given is only and is for ever God's life. We aren't jump-started by the Spirit and then left to ourselves to carry on the whole enterprise. Christ is our life (Col. 3: 4). It's the difference between jump-starting a stopped heart and getting a heart transplant.

Yet what a burden is placed upon believers when the Christian life is presented as the task of keeping oneself alive by keeping the house rules. (Of course, the 'house' can be the most stodgily conservative evangelical or the most zapped charismatic – the rules will be different, but the mentality and the burden are exactly the same.) What glorious liberty can be enjoyed when we rest by faith in the truth that our life is in fact the life of the risen Christ, mediated to us by the Spirit. Can we add to Christ's life by either dressing up (or dressing down) for church? Is the life of the Son of God deficient so as to cause us a deficit in our life, a deficit that can only be made up by saying (or not saying) 'Praise the Lord' at the right time? What on earth does legalism hope to add to the resurrection life of God?

Not even God's law could bring life – it was only ever given as a schoolmaster to lead us to the one who alone can give life

How to apply this cure? 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.' (Col. 3: 1-3)

Fifth, the inward work of God's grace in regeneration is matched by his 'external' act of justification. It happens quite without our help. We do not contribute to it at all. However much our flesh might want to have the satisfaction of doing something to justify itself, and however much our view of the conversion experience might make us emphasise the importance of our decision, justification is something done by God for us but without our aid. It is a declaration by God, on the basis of the cross, that we are clear of all the charges and condemnation that the law could impose upon us. It is done once and for all – no accusation will ever separate me from God! All the sins that I will yet commit were carried then on the cross. It is done by the Father through the blood of the Son. Put negatively, it means that your guilt and condemnation are gone (Rom. 8: 1). Put positively, you are restored to your proper family relation with God and all its many blessings – peace with God (Rom. 5: 1); salvation from death (Rom. 5: 9-10); receiving the Spirit (Gal. 3: 1ff.); adoption/sonship, (Gal. 4: 4-6); the inheritance, which is eternal life (Tit. 3: 7).

If I can mix the theological terms a bit you have a covering from the terrors of the law – the covering of Christ's blood. Why live as if it were too small a covering? Why stitch onto it a few rags of your own righteousness? Why do we do this in our churches? Mad! And also ungrateful: isn't it a bit of an insult to Christ? And doesn't it call into question the Father's declaration? The legalist lives as if God were too lenient! Christ's work is enough for the Father to declare you as being justified in his sight. What an antidote to the spiritual insecurity that legalism creates!

Sixth, what God has begun in regeneration and justification, he completes in our sanctification. And here the legalist has his or her firmest foothold. Here our co-operation is vital – we are involved in our increasing Christ-likeness. We worship him with our renewed wills by surrendering them to his will. We are in the position of being holy because we are in Christ, who is our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Cor. 1: 30), but we still don't practice holiness – well, not for long! So how about a bunch of rules to help us and God along a bit? Well, it certainly seems like a reasonable idea, and it certainly seems a whole lot better than not bothering about holiness – which is what every legalist suspects this article of mine is encouraging!

But to resort to our rule-books in order to help God along is, as Paul almost put it, to 'lose the head'. 'Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow' (Col. 2: 16-19) Your holiness is sourced in the Holy One. The freedom which that brings us is from a holiness that is sourced in a largely social setting. The problem with legalism is that it defines our holiness with reference to standards of conduct set within a particular social group. We lose sight of that too easily, ending up with a notion of holiness that is earth-bound and parochial. So we question the sanctity of Luther because he enjoyed beer! Or Calvin because he played bowls on a Sunday; or Gertrude over there because she let her daughter wear two earrings in the

same ear; or Norbert over there who doesn't always seem joyfully victorious in his Christian walk and didn't go on a mission this summer; or Ralph who smokes a pipe. Since holiness is bigger than our local boundaries can encompass, his work of sanctification enlarges the horizons of the heart: legalism narrows them.

The ironies of God grow deeper by the day. The seventh antidote to legalism is the Lordship of Christ. 'What?' 'Isn't that just authoritarianism writ large – rules and do this and bossing about

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sanctity of Luther be-
cause he enjoyed beer!
Or Calvin because
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Sunday*

and style being cramped and where's my individuality now? Panic not!

Consider these medicinal words, balm to the oppressed soul, from the Westminster Confession of Faith: 'God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also' (Chapter 20). To bind the conscience to Christ is to liberate it from the tyranny of man – and of the devil. The historical legalism that the

authors of the Confession had in mind might not be the one that many of the readers of the *Record* have suffered under, but the principle applies just the same. It expresses so much of the New Testament's teaching; read, for starters, Matt. 7: 1ff; Rom. 14: 1ff; Galatians in its entirety; Col. 2: 16ff; Jas. 2: 12ff; and 4: 12. Herein lies the corrective for those who would run from legalism into license or libertinism; and herein lies the rebuke to those who would label as sinful or rebellious anyone who rejects their legalistic control.

Legalism works best upon those in our fellowships who are youngest in the faith and/or insecure and needing the acceptance and approval of those leaders to whom they look up

But this is not an easy cure to apply. Legalism works best upon those in our fellowships who are youngest in the faith and/or insecure and needing the acceptance and approval of those leaders to whom they look up. It takes a measure of brass neck to refuse to toe the line, knuckle under and conform. But the wonderful thing is that having a mind that really reckons on the Lordship of Christ can give the strength of character and wisdom to know both when and how to be yourself without using that as an excuse for being selfish. Resilient refusal to be judged by another's conscience comes easily to some but not so easily to others. And not to be swayed by what others might

say – and they will say! – can be psychologically difficult without simply being thoughtlessly unloving. Paul, who wrote, 'Why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience?' went on to write 'Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.' (See 1Cor. 10: 23ff.)

The final antidote is the best. **Eighth, live for the glory of God.** If his glory is your goal and delight, then you will learn to spot those false spiritualities which ultimately glorify power- or control-hungry Christians. And you will spot those same tendencies within yourself. Live for the glory of God and that which is less than God will neither satisfy you nor master you. There is nothing like the upwardly-mobile life (a life moving heavenward) to make the legalism of church life clearly apparent and transparently false. It's not real holiness; it never produces the largeness of heart that Christ produces; it has no glory; it gives no delight to the soul; it is so obviously not what you were made for; no-one would have died to save you into that. Live for the glory of God. Therein lies your point and purpose in life; therein lies your true freedom; and therein lies your own true glory.

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The Importance

Ian Glover, Livingston

PRAYER

Hughes Old in his book *Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Ministers* expresses his concern that the value (and consequently the practice) of public or corporate prayer has been largely diminished or lost in large parts of the modern Reformed Church. His response to this situation is to encourage the Reformed Church to recover its rich heritage in the practice, language and theology of public prayer. He remarks 'If public prayer is to be recovered as a meaningful part of the Christian life, considerably more time, thought and preparation needs to be given to it.'¹ Terry Johnston expresses a similar concern in his essay 'Liturgical Studies'.² He observes with respect to public or corporate prayer, 'the pastor's prayers have received scant attention in recent decades as to either their practice or pastoral value. ...'

This study considers the significance and value of public prayer in the public worship of God. Attention is given to the distinction between private and public prayer, to an examination of some biblical private and public prayers, and to the practice, language and theology of such prayers. The value of such prayers as patterns of the practice of public prayer in particular is then considered.

In *Prayer and Preaching* Karl Barth remarks, 'Prayer means turning to him who has already spoken to us in the Gospel and the Law.'³ Similarly, Eugene Peterson in his book, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* comments, '... prayer is never the first word; it is always the second word. God has the first word.'⁴

These comments suggest that prayer forms part of a conversation between God and the believer, in which the believer responds to God's prior address. Again, in the words of Peterson, 'Prayer is answering speech; it is not primarily 'address' but 'response'.⁵ God's speech stimulates or excites or provokes a human response. Prayer is answering God.

God's mind is made known to us in scripture, which 'is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3: 16-17), and among other things, scripture has been given to teach us to pray. As Hughes Old observes, 'The word leads us to prayer and prayer leads us to the word'.⁶

God's word teaches the church to pray⁷. It provides, for example, patterns or models of prayer from which the church may learn⁸, including the specific teaching and example of our Lord (Lk. 11: 1-14; Mk. 1: 35, 6: 46, 14: 32-42). The principal handbook of prayer, however, is the book of Psalms. 'The great and sprawling university that Hebrews and Christians have attended to learn to answer God, to learn to pray, has been the Psalms. More people have learned to pray by matriculating in the Psalms than any other way. The Psalms were the prayer book of Israel; they were the prayer book of Jesus; they are the prayer book of the church' (Peterson, 1987, 50). The Psalms provide the Church with a repository of prayer for every occasion⁹.

THE SHORTER CATECHISM

The biblical teaching on prayer has been summarised in the Presbyterian tradition in the Westminster Standards. *The Shorter Catechism* reads as follows:

Q. 98 What is prayer?

Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with con-

of Public Prayer

fession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.

Q. 99 What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?

The whole word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called *The Lord's Prayer*.

The *Catechism* teaches that prayer is an address to God in Christ's name. It is man's response to God who has made himself and his will known in scripture, and who has revealed that he hears and answers prayer. Prayer is addressed to the Holy One of Israel by sinners and includes confession of sin¹⁰. Prayer which is agreeable to his will, as made known in scripture, will be answered by God according to his will and for Christ's sake¹¹. It should also include a thankful acknowledgement of all of God's mercies.

The inclusion of many prayers in scripture (especially the Psalms), and the example of the disciples' request and our Lord's response, (Lk. 11: 1-13) indicates that the practice of prayer can be taught and learned¹². The disciples recognised that they needed to learn how to pray in the light of the

advent and ministry of Jesus, and he taught them how to pray and what they should pray for¹³.

He taught them, first, that his disciples could address God (the Father) as 'Father' in a way *similar* to and patterned upon his own approach to God¹⁴. When they prayed they were to approach him as children would approach their father – with a mixture of intimacy, reverence and boldness. Second, he taught them to be concerned principally for God's honour in terms of his name and kingdom (so that his will might be done on earth as in heaven [Matt. 6: 10]). Third, he taught them to approach their heavenly Father about the ordinary concerns of life, such as what was needed for life; pardon of sin; and protection from temptation/testing (and the evil one [Matt. 6: 13]). And fourth, he taught them to approach God with the boldness of the friend at midnight; with the confidence of those who are promised that if they seek they shall find; and with the certainty that as our heavenly Father he will give his children every good gift – including the Holy Spirit (Lk. 11: 5-14).

PRIVATE PRAYER

1. Hannah (1 Sam 1: 11, 24-28)

The books of Samuel tell the story of the transition of Israel from a tribal league governed by local judges to a people governed by monarchy. This transition was overseen by the eponymous prophet-judge Samuel, whose extraordinary birth is recounted at the beginning of the four-volume history of Samuel to Kings:

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD's temple. In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. And she made a vow, saying, 'O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'

As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, 'How long will you keep on get

ting drunk? Get rid of your wine.' 'Not so, my lord', Hannah replied, 'I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.'

Eli answered, 'Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.'

She said, 'May your servant find favour in your eyes.' Then she went on her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, 'Because I asked the LORD for him'.

Hannah was (probably) the first wife of Elkanah from Ramathaim. However, because 'the LORD had closed her womb', Elkanah had married a second wife, Peninnah, who bore him children and provoked Hannah to such an extent that she wept and would not eat notwithstanding Elkanah's fruitless attempts to console her.

On one occasion, as the family was worshipping at Shiloh, Hannah stood up, and 'in bitterness of soul [she] wept much and prayed to the LORD' (1: 10). The account details the characteristics of her prayer.

First, Hannah poured out her soul about her own personal concerns. Her childlessness was not only a source of personal distress. There were also social implications in respect of her status and her treatment by others (as exemplified by Peninnah). Consequently, in bitterness of soul she addressed Yahweh and pleaded that he 'would look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son.' Her request was personal and specific.

Second, her prayer was intense.

The prayer expressed her emotional response to her situation as she prayed 'in bitterness of soul [and] wept much'. Indeed, such was her intensity that as she kept on praying – moving her lips but not expressing a sound – Eli, the aged priest, believed that she was drunk. The intensity of her prayer was not, however, the basis of the answer to her prayer (which was based on Yahweh's covenantal relationship with Hannah¹⁵) but was an expression of the depths of her anguish and desire for a son.

Third, her prayer was the prayer of a woman who trusted in God. Instead of blaming God, she prayed. It is also evident in the way she approached God. In her desperation she called upon Yahweh of hosts (LORD Almighty NIV), the one whom she acknowledged as the covenant God, and the commander of the host of heaven and earth – the almighty God. Further, she came to him as a self confessed servant (rather than a wicked woman [1: 16]) who was dependent upon him and who could appeal to him to deliver her from her distress. The LORD of hosts was not only the God of Israel, but also *her* God. Finally, as part of her appeal to God she made a solemn vow by which she devoted to Yahweh's service the son she might bear (1: 11). This vow was later fulfilled (1: 25–28, 2: 11).

Fourth, her prayer was answered. When Elkanah and his family returned to their home, 'Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her.' She conceived and gave birth to a son. The language is reminiscent of the conception and births of Isaac (Gen. 21: 1–3) and Samson (Judg. 13: 1–5, 24) each of whom was a significant agent in progressing the redemptive purposes of God. Hannah's prayer was answered in the terms of her request. Her son would also play a significant role in the development of Yahweh's covenantal purpose.

2. Jesus in Gethsemane (Mk 14: 32 – 36)

As the hour of his death drew near Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.' Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'

It was in Gethsemane that the full horror of his obedience to his Father's will became clear to him, and he 'began to be deeply distressed and troubled.' His response was to separate from his disciples and turn to his Father in intense and private prayer, requesting that 'if possible the hour might pass from him.' His request was not an expression of rebellion or disobedience. His wish was that his obedience might not entail having to endure the terror of *that* particular cup of the judgement and wrath of God (Isa. 51: 17, 22; Jer. 49: 12). Nevertheless, he concludes by giving himself to his Father's will in voluntary submission and obedience: 'Yet not what I will, but what you will.'

R. T. France comments, 'On both previous occasions when Mark has depicted Jesus at prayer (1: 35, 6: 46) he was praying alone, having taken specific measures to get away even from his closest disciples. So now again he goes away from the disciples in order to pray. Prayer for Jesus (unlike some others, 12: 40) was not a public performance' (France, 2002, 582).

Similarly, Calvin comments,

We have seen elsewhere that to excite Himself to a greater intensity of prayer the Lord prayed *without witnesses*. Led away from the sight of men, we gather our thoughts better, to be more intent on what we are doing. It is not necessary to withdraw into distant corners whenever we wish to pray (indeed it is not always suitable), but when some

greater necessity presses upon us, since prayer's fervour flows more freely in solitude, it is useful for us to pray alone. If the Son of God did not neglect this assistance it would be more than mad pride not to apply it to our own use. Besides, where God is the sole judge and there is no fear of self seeking, there the faithful soul *uncovers itself more intimately* and in greater simplicity, unburdens its desires, sighs, anxieties, fears, hopes, and joys into the lap of God. God allows His people many foibles when they pray in private, which would be reckoned forward in the sight of men¹⁶.

Hannah's and Jesus' private prayers illustrate that private prayer involves a *separation* from the company of others, and the commitment of *personal concerns* to the Lord.

PUBLIC PRAYER

1. David's Prayer of Thanksgiving (1 Chr. 29: 10-20)

Chronicles is a post-exilic work intended to challenge and encourage the small and beleaguered community which had returned to the promised land. Attention is given to Yahweh's promises and to the status of the restoration community, especially in respect of faithful service to God (with particular reference to the kings) and the acceptable worship of God. Emphasis is given to the speeches and prayers of the major players as a means of theological instruction and devotional challenge.

David's prayer combines elements of praise, thanksgiving and request as he leads the whole assembly in prayer in response to their provision for the construction of the Temple.

Praise

Praise be to you, O LORD,
God of our father Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and
he power
and the glory and the majesty and the
splendour,

for everything in heaven and earth is
yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom,
you are exalted as head over all.
Wealth and honour come from you;
you are the ruler of all things.
In your hands are strength and power
to exalt and give strength to all.
(29: 10b-13)

David opens his prayer with an ascription of praise to Yahweh in which he reflects upon who God is in himself. Yahweh is 'the God of our father Israel.' Israel's God is Yahweh, the covenant making and keeping God. Israel, and the restoration community, are loved by Yahweh on account of his commitment to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 17: 4-8; 26: 2-5; 28: 13-18. Cf. Ex. 3: 14-15; Rom. 11: 28). Further, Yahweh is worthy of praise 'from everlasting to everlasting' – an idiom which emphasises that his praise-worthiness is without diminution.

Consistent with the biblical pattern, David explains why it is that Yahweh is worthy of everlasting praise. He is a great king. The language used by David is characteristic of language used to celebrate the majesty of kings and emperors. Yahweh is great, powerful, majestic, splendid and glorious. When David declares that 'yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; and that you are exalted as head over all', he acknowledges Yahweh's universal and exclusive kingship which he exercises as creator and redeemer (1 Chr. 16: 23-33; Ps. 93, Ps. 96). Furthermore, he is to be praised because he is a generous king. Yahweh is the giver of every gift to all (and to his people in particular). It is because 'wealth and honour' come from him, and in his 'hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all' that David ascribes to him praise. David and Israel (both as David's kingdom and as the restoration community) have been able to make provision for the building of the temple because of their dependence upon Yahweh's great generosity.

Thanksgiving

Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your holy name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.

(29: 13-17)

David introduces a note of thanksgiving as he reflects upon Yahweh's dealings with both himself and the people. His words express amazement at the generosity of their response to him, which is beyond reason and expectation. His astonished humility is evident in the rhetorical question, 'But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?' Their devotion to Yahweh, as expressed through their provision towards the construction costs of the temple (see 29: 2-9), excites an expression of joyous amazement.

David continues by acknowledging his and the nation's dependence upon Yahweh for the (covenant) blessing of wealth (eg. Deut 28: 11, 30: 1-10). Like their fathers of old, they are only 'aliens and strangers' in his sight dependant upon his gracious and generous provision (eg. Gen. 17: 8, 23: 4), whilst their lives and hopes on earth are no more substantial than a 'shadow' (cf. Pss. 39: 4). All that they have comes from Yahweh himself.

David further acknowledges that they are at best unprofitable servants, returning to Yahweh what he had pre-

viously given to them. Yet what they give is nevertheless given 'willingly and with honest intent'. Their service is the joyous and willing service of a devoted king and people to the God who tests the heart and is pleased with integrity (see also 28: 9-10; Ps 7: 9).

Petition

O LORD, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep this desire in the hearts of your people for ever, and keep their hearts loyal to you. And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, requirements and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided.

Then David said to the whole assembly, 'Praise the LORD your God.' So they all praised the LORD, the God of their fathers, they bowed low and fell prostrate before the LORD and the king.

(29: 18-20)

David's praise and thanksgiving is followed by an impassioned request on behalf of the people and his successor Solomon. The covenant relationship between Yahweh and the people and their king (see 1 Chr. 17; 2 Sam 7) continues to be the context and basis of David's petition. He addresses Yahweh as the 'God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel'¹⁷ who had demonstrated his faithfulness to Israel in their deliverance from Egypt, during the period of their wilderness wanderings and progressive occupation of the promised land.

He petitions Yahweh to keep his people 'loyal' to him, especially with respect to the construction of the temple and authentic worship. And he calls upon him 'to give [his] son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your decrees' and that he would build the temple for Yahweh as God had promised through his servant Nathan the prophet (17: 10b-14; 2 Sam 7: 11b-16). Again, David recognises that God's people are dependent upon him as they serve him, whether in walking

in his ways or in building (or rebuilding) the temple.

The Chronicler includes an account of David's prayer to encourage and challenge the restoration community to a similar devotion to Yahweh. The prayer contains emphases which it was important for the restoration community to be reminded of as they struggled to recognise their status and responsibilities as God's covenant people.

He reminds them, first, that they were descendants of the fathers and so belonged to the covenant people of Yahweh the covenant God (1 Chr. 1-9; cf. for example Hag. 2: 5; Zec. 1: 2-6; Mal. 1: 2, 2: 4-5, 3: 6, 4: 4, 6). As God's people, who were the objects of his covenant care, they had the privilege of access to him, and on the basis of the covenant, appealing to him for his strength and power to engage in his service.

The Chronicler reminds them, secondly, that as a covenant people they had covenant obligations to fulfil. He directs their attention, for example, to the preparations that David and the people of Israel had made for the construction of the temple by Solomon. In this way he challenges and encourages his own community to resume the rebuilding of the temple which had been abandoned following opposition from the surrounding nations, and a declension in their devotion to God (cf. Ezra 4: 1-5, 24, 5: 1-6, 12; Haggai; Malachi).

He reminds them, thirdly, that they could fulfil their covenant responsibilities by depending upon Yahweh their God. David recognised that he and the people were able to make the preparations for the temple because he depended upon Yahweh's gracious and generous provision. In the same way the restoration community would be able to fulfil their obligations insofar as they trusted and depended upon him (cf. Ezra 3: 1-6, 7; Hag. 1: 12-15, 2: 8-9; Zec. 8: 9-17; Mal. 3: 6-12).

Finally, he reminds them that their service was to be performed both willingly and joyously. One of the great

emphases of David's prayer was that he and the people offered their gifts to Yahweh willingly and joyfully. This followed from their recognition that all that they had was in fact a free gift from God. This same attitude was to characterise the Chronicler's community as they were challenged to resume the reconstruction of the temple (cf. Ezra 3: 10-13, 6: 16-18; Zec. 8: 20-22; Mal. 3: 6-16).

2. The Primitive Church (Acts 4: 23-31)

Peter and John had healed a well-known cripple at the Beautiful Gate of the temple in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. This remarkable healing was brought to the attention of the temple authorities who objected to their proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They had them arrested and imprisoned for the night. On the following morning Peter and John were interrogated, threatened and finally warned not to speak any longer in Jesus' name (Acts 3: 1-4: 22).

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord, and against his Anointed one."

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

(4: 32-28)

When they were released, Peter and John returned to the church and reported their experiences. The church's response was to join together in an act of corporate prayer. The prayer contains two elements – confession/acknowledgement and petition.

Confession/Acknowledgement

The prayer opens with a series of statements which emphasise God's greatness, in terms of both his transcendence and imminence. He is addressed as 'Sovereign Lord' (*despota*), a title which emphasises his absolute lordship as owner or master of all – a lordship which is expressed and acknowledged in three fundamental ways.

First, God is acknowledged as the creator and (therefore) owner of all things. He is the one who 'made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.' The language used in the prayer echoes the language of the fourth commandment and of the Psalms. In Exodus, the reason given for keeping the Sabbath day holy is imitation of the creator: 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy ... For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day' (Ex 20: 8, 11 – italics added). Similarly, in Ps 146 the blessedness of the one whose help is the God of Israel is pronounced, particularly because he is the *Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them* – the LORD, who remains faithful for ever' (146: 5–6. Italics added. See also, for example, Ps. 121: 2; Neh. 9: 6; Isa. 37: 16).

Second, God is acknowledged as the God who has revealed his will in scripture. He is there, and is not silent¹⁸. This is evident from the quotation of the opening verses of Psalm 2: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord, and against his anointed one'.

The psalm is a coronation psalm¹⁹ which celebrates the coronation of the Davidic kings. These kings had a unique

relationship with and responsibility to Yahweh. They were his anointed kings equipped to rule his people according to his word for their benefit and his glory. Rebellion against his king was rebellion against him – although such rebellion was ultimately futile because of the status of Yahweh's anointed and the promises made to him.

The experience of the Davidic dynasty, however, did not match the sentiments expressed by the Psalmist, and although the extent of the kingdom reached its zenith during Solomon's reign, the poetic and theological emphases of the psalm find their fulfilment in the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth (so Matt. 3: 17, 17: 5; Acts 4: 25–28, 13: 32–37; Rom. 1: 4; Heb. 1: 5, 5: 5; Revelation *passim*). The experience of Jesus, and the interpreting ministry of the Holy Spirit, taught the Church to understand its experience in the light of the message of Psalm 2.

Third, the church acknowledges that God is the God of providence and history²⁰. The theological themes of the psalm find their fulfilment in the historical experience of Jesus and, by association, the Church: 'Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.' The actions of Herod, Pilate and the crowd stirred up by their leaders were acts of conspiracy against God and his Christ Jesus of Nazareth. Their actions were foreordained and accomplished God's great redemptive purpose. The opposition of the governing classes and the people was futile whilst the sufferings of Jesus (and the Church) accomplished and advanced God's redemptive purpose. They could be confident, therefore, that the opposition they experienced was consistent with God's redemptive purpose, and would prove to be futile in hindering the progress of the gospel.

Petition

Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

(4:29–31)

The church's confession of God's greatness is followed by a series of specific petitions. First, they address God as 'Lord', a name which emphasises both God's lordship as creator and owner of all things, and also his covenant relationship with his people. They call upon him, first, to 'consider their threats'. The threats they had received were serious and were intended to intimidate the church into silence, and it was in the context of those threats that the church made their specific appeal to God. They called upon him to take note of the particular situation they were concerned with, and to respond to it. Second, they call upon him to 'enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness', with words which echo the language of the Psalms, for example, "When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stout-hearted" (Ps 138: 3). The church recognises her prophetic (and Christ-like) status by identifying herself as God's servant²¹, who is duty bound to obey God rather than the civil and religious authorities (4: 19), and is aware of her frailty and dependence upon the Lord. They call upon him to give them the strength they need fearlessly to proclaim his message²². Third, they ask the Lord to 'stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' The reference to God's hand is a familiar metaphor from the OT which emphasises God's agency and power /activity²³, and is,

therefore, a call to God to act powerfully in Jesus' name as confirmation of his resurrection and of their message.

The church petitions the Lord with a confidence founded upon the message of Psalm 2, which whilst recognising the fact of rebellion against the Lord and his Christ, also emphasises that such rebellion is ultimately futile. They are servants of the resurrected and reigning Christ, and participate in and contribute to his victory. Consequently, they could confidently appeal to the Lord to act in response to their situation and for his glory. Their prayer was answered in terms of their request, for 'after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly'.

These prayers illustrate three characteristics which distinguish public prayer from private prayer. Public prayer is offered *in the presence* of a congregation by a leader who addresses God *on behalf* of the congregation and expresses *the congregation's* concerns.

David's prayer exhibits each of these features. **First**, he prayed in a public context²⁴. David 'praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly' (1 Chr. 29: 10). He did not withdraw from the assembly to praise God, or to address him in prayer. He prayed in the presence of the people, and concluded by exhorting 'the whole assembly' to praise the Lord their God (1 Chr. 29: 20).

Second, he speaks in their name and prays, 'Now our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this?' (29: 13-14). David prayed on behalf of the assembled people of Israel. This is evident in his use of first person plural personal pronouns (29: 13, 14, 15, 16, 18) and in the mode by which he addressed God ('our God' [29: 13]; 'Yahweh our God' [29: 16]; and 'Yahweh the God of our fathers' [29: 16]).

Third, he expresses the concerns of the community of which he was a

part. He expresses humble amazement at their generosity in providing for the construction of the temple ('But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?' [29: 14]). He recognizes their status as aliens and strangers along with the brevity of their lives ('We are aliens and strangers in your sight' [29: 15] and 'Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope' [29: 15]). He also acknowledges the willingness with which the people of Israel had contributed to the temple building project and appeals to the Lord to keep this desire among his people for ever: 'I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. ... And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. O LORD, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep this desire in the hearts of your people for ever, and keep their hearts loyal to you' (29: 17-18).

Finally, David prays for the faithfulness of his son Solomon²⁵, who as his chosen successor would be responsible for the construction of the temple: 'And give my son Solomon the whole-hearted devotion to keep your commands, requirements and decrees and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided' (29: 19).

The primitive church's prayer explicitly exhibits two of the distinguishing characteristics of corporate prayer²⁶. After being released by the Sanhedrin, Peter and John returned to 'their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them' (Acts 4: 24). The church's response was to 'raise their voices together in prayer to God'. They prayed in a public context, as a body of believers and not as distinct individuals.

Their prayer was also concerned with the concern of the community as a whole. They were identified as children of 'our father David' and as 'your servants' (4: 25, 29), and requested that they might be equipped by God to speak his word with great boldness. This was a corporate identity and con-

cern. And their prayer was answered in the terms of their request – 'they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly' (4: 31).

Public Prayer and Edification

Paul addresses the church at Corinth about a series of pastoral issues that were of concern to him, including the importance of edifying the body of Christ – especially in the context of public worship (1 Cor. 14).

He exhorts the church at Corinth to 'follow the way of love' (1 Cor. 14: 1) which 'builds up' others (8: 1). The church of Christ is to be characterised by a Christ-like concern for the edification of others. Consequently, he encourages the Corinthians to 'eagerly desire spiritual gifts', and in particular to desire eagerly 'the gift of prophecy'²⁷ by which the church may be edified (14: 5).

He then emphasises the importance of intelligible speech within the church by referring to the analogies of the distinctive notes played on a musical instrument so as to produce a recognisable tune; the clear sound of a trumpet in battle used to convey military instructions; and the divisive effect of speaking in an unintelligible language. Paul applies his analogies to the Corinthians by concluding, 'So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church' (14: 12).

He continues to emphasise the importance of intelligible speech in the corporate worship of the church by urging those who spoke in tongues to seek the gift of interpretation whenever they were praising God or praying to God, so that any who heard them would be able to say 'Amen' and be edified in his faith (14: 13-17). So important is this principle that Paul asserts, 'But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand in a tongue' (14: 18-19).

Paul concludes by emphasising that if an unbeliever enters the congregation and hears and understands God's word 'he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" (14: 20-25).

Public prayer, therefore, has as a secondary purpose the edification of those who are led in prayer.

The Language of Prayer

One of the characteristics of biblical prayer is the distinctive use of traditional (scriptural) language of devotion. Biblical prayers characteristically employ the vocabulary and themes of earlier tradition and devotion. This is evident in the prayers of David and the primitive church.

David's opening phrase reflect the language of praise which occurs throughout the Psalms (although the second person form of address is unusual²⁸): 'Blessed/Praise be you, O Yahweh' (29: 10 – see, for example, Pss. 41: 13; 72: 18-19; 89: 52; 103: 1-2, 22; 104: 1; 106: 48). His acknowledgement of Yahweh as the 'God of our father Israel' and the 'God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Israel' (29: 10, 18) is a familiar covenant confession (for example, Gen. 26: 24; 28: 13; 31: 42, 53; 32: 9; 43: 23; 46: 3; Ex. 3: 6, 15-16; 4: 5; 1 Kg. 18: 36; Ps. 75: 9; 94: 7) as is the recognition that God's people are 'aliens and strangers' in an inhospitable world (29: 15 – Gen. 17: 8; 23: 4). Similarly, references to God's 'holy name' (29: 16) and to God as the one who 'test[s] the heart' (29: 17) reflect familiar theological convictions and liturgical practice ('holy name': Pss. 30: 4; 33: 21; 103: 1; 105: 3; 106: 47; 145: 21; and 'test the heart': Ps. 17: 3; Jer. 11: 20; 12: 3; 17: 10).

The primitive church's prayer of Acts 4 reflects a similar use of language. The 'Sovereign Lord' is acknowledged as the maker of 'the heaven and the sea, and everything in them' and uses the familiar language of the fourth commandment (Ex. 20: 8, 11; Ps. 146: 5-6. See also, for example, Ps. 121: 2; Neh. 9: 6; Isa. 37: 16). The prayer also includes a quotation from Ps. 2 (2: 1-2) and ref-

erences to God's 'holy servant' (4: 29 – see Isa. 42: 1; 49: 3, 5-7; 50: 10; 52: 13; 53: 11); his stretched out 'hand' (4: 30 – see, for example, Ex. 3: 20; 6: 1, 6; 7: 4-5; 9: 15; 13: 3, 14; 15: 6, 12; 1 Sam. 5: 6; Pss. 118: 15-16; 136: 12; Isa. 41: 10; 63: 12); and to 'miraculous signs and wonders' (4: 30 – see, for example, Ex. 3: 20; 4: 21; 7: 3; 11: 9-10; Deut. 4: 34; Pss. 72: 18; 105: 27; 106: 22).

The Theology of Prayer

The Chronicler's account of David's prayer also gives expression to the theological basis and themes of biblically based prayer. David acknowledges Yahweh as the covenant God to whom he may appeal with the confidence that he will hear and answer his prayer (he is 'God of our father Israel' to whom he appeals 'keep this desire in the hearts of your people for ever, and keep their hearts loyal to you' [29: 10] see, for example, Gen. 17: 4-8; 26: 2-5; 28: 13-18. cf. Ex. 3: 14-15); of Yahweh as king and ruler of all who is able to respond to their requests without being hindered by his own creation ('Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom ... you are the ruler of all things' [29: 11, 12] see 1 Chr. 16: 23-33; Pss. 22: 28, 89: 9, 93, 96); and of their dependence upon God who has already demonstrated his willingness to bless them by bestowing the covenant blessings of wealth and honour upon them ('Wealth and honour come from you' [29: 12] , for example, Deut. 28: 11, 30: 1-10).

Luke's account of the primitive church's prayer gives similar expression to the theological basis of the church's practice. God is the creator and lord of all things (4: 24); the God who reveals his will in scripture (4: 25-26); the God of providence and history (4: 27-28); and the God who hears and answers prayer (4: 29-31). The language of the prayer suggests a community (or at least the leadership if the community) which was familiar with the language and message of the Old Testament, and was able to use the language to express the sentiments and concerns of the

church with fluency and contextual appropriateness.

Biblically Informed Public Prayer

These particular public prayers are models of prayer in terms of the language, theology and practice of prayer, and demonstrate how such prayer can edify the church.

The use of traditional (biblical) language of devotion, in particular, is both significant and provides a pattern for the church to follow. **First**, it indicates a familiarity with the language of devotion. The prayers of the faithful (and especially of the leadership) are prayers of those who are familiar with the practice of prayer.

Second, the language of devotion and liturgy is appropriately employed as the vehicle of individual or corporate devotion. The language of scripture serves to express the response and emotion of the believer to God in every situation.

Third, the familiar language of devotion expresses the believer's theology and practice. His expression of praise and thanksgiving demonstrates his belief (among other things) that God is good and dependable, and is worthy of praise. Accordingly, he responds with praise and thanksgiving. Similarly, his confession of sin expresses his belief that he is a sinner answerable to a holy God, who, as the gracious and compassionate covenant God, is also willing to pardon the penitent sinner.

Fourth, the language of devotion directs us how we should pray and what we should pray for. If God has revealed his will in scripture, including how we should approach him, then the language of scripture can inform and convey the believer's desires in prayer. He can pray with greater confidence and expectation as he prays back to God his own promises. In the language of John, 'This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us' (1 Jn. 5: 14).

Finally, the use of familiar scriptural devotional language in public prayer

will edify the wider congregation. The minister's public prayers have a significant impact upon a congregation, and it is from his practice that they will learn the language, theology, practice and value of prayer. His public prayers will provide a pattern of biblical and believing prayer from which others may learn and be built up in their faith.

Conclusion

This brief study has attempted to demonstrate the value of patterning our practice of public prayer in the public worship of God upon biblical example. The distinction between private and public prayer; and biblical examples of public prayer (such as David's prayer in 1 Chr. 29, and the primitive church's prayer in Acts 4) have been examined, and the edificatory value of these prayers for the church's practice of public prayer has been demonstrated.

Public prayer is an important element in the public worship of God to which attention should be given by ministers and elders. First, ministers and elders are called by God to the privilege of bringing before him a congregation's concerns, on their behalf and in their presence²⁹. Second, public prayer is a responsibility which can be learned and cultivated from the practice of the church but especially from the examples and patterns of such prayer in scripture³⁰. Finally, public prayer is also a means of congregational edification. As Terry Johnston observes, 'A pastor's scripturally enriched public prayers may soothe the troubled, calm the anxious, answer the doubting, stiffen the wavering, break the unrepentant, and in so doing remove the need of further counselling or preaching' (*Liturgical Studies* WTJ 60:2 (Fall 1998): 304). Consequently, rather than being regarded as a burden to bear, public prayer should be considered as a blessing to receive, cultivate and exercise for the glory of God and the good of his people.

Endnotes

¹ Old, Hughes Oliphant, *Leading in Prayer: A workbook for Ministers*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 361.

² *Liturgical Studies* in WTJ 60:2 (Fall 1988): 304

³ Barth K., *Prayer and Preaching*, (London: SCM 1964), 15.

⁴ Peterson, Eugene H., *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1987), 45.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*, 180

⁷ 'God also shows us the way to set about praying. Prayer is not an arbitrary action nor yet something undertaken blindly. When we pray we cannot adventure according to our fancy in this or that direction, asking whatever we please, for God commands man to follow him and take the place which he has assigned to him. This is regulated by God, not by our initiative.' (Barth, 1964, 19-20). See also the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q. 99

⁸ 'The Bible provides a typology of prayer. This typology is an ingenious series of examples of how and why God's people are to pray' (Old, 1995, 7).

⁹ 'If we wish to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Psalms are necessary. They are God's gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive ... and honest' (Peterson, *Answering God: Learning to Pray from the Psalms*. (London: Marshall Pickering 1989), 4.

¹⁰ 'A full diet of Christian prayer naturally includes lamentations, confessions of sin, supplications for forgiveness, and petitions for the gifts of the Holy Spirit' (Old, 1995, 77). Also, 'The prayers of lamentation and confession among the psalms express and important theological truth – humankind is a fallen creature and in need of redemption ... the cries of our fallen race are to be heard all about us' (*ibid.*, 79).

¹¹ In the OT God was asked to act for the sake of his own name – it was

acknowledged that the ground of answered prayer was God's grace and concern for his own glory. See, for example, Pss 23: 3, 25: 11, 31: 3, 79: 9, 143: 11.

¹² 'God also shows us the way to set about praying. Prayer is not an arbitrary action nor yet something undertaken blindly. When we pray we cannot adventure according to our fancy in this or that direction, asking whatever we please, for God commands man to follow him and take the place which he has assigned to him. This is regulated by God, not by our initiative.' (Barth, 1964, 19-20)

¹³ Jesus' teaching derived from a combination of the pattern of prayer found in the OT and his own distinctive teaching as Messiah.

¹⁴ The believer's relationship to the Father, whilst patterned upon our Lord's relationship with his Father, is only *similar* to his relationship. Jesus' relationship is a relationship of *being* (he is the unique consubstantial Son of the Father) whilst our relationship is a relationship of status (believers are sons of God by a gracious adoption).

¹⁵ *Yahweh remembered* Hannah (1:19) – a word loaded with covenantal associations (eg. Ex 2: 24) especially in terms of the broader context of the progression of God's redemptive purpose, and the role of sons born to childless women in the development of that purpose: Sarah (Gn 17, 21); Rebekah (Gn 25: 21); Rachel (Gn 29: 31); the wife of Manoah (Jdg 13: 2) and Mary (Lk 1: 26-34).

¹⁶ Calvin 3, 1972, 149. Italics added.

¹⁷ A phrase which only occurs elsewhere at 1 Kgs 18:36 (Braun, 284)

¹⁸ So Francis Schaeffer

¹⁹ '... Ps 2 is a *coronation psalm*; such a classification depends primarily upon the content of the psalm, rather than any characteristic form which distinguishes it from other royal psalms' (Craigie, 1986, 64). See also Broyles (1999, 44); Kidner (1973, 50).

²⁰ See *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q11: 'God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise and powerful pre-

serving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions'. See also WCF.V

²¹ See also Isa 42: 1-7, 49: 1-7, 50: 4-9, 61: 1-3; Jer 7: 25, 25: 4, 26: 5, 29: 19, 44: 4; Acts 13: 47.

²² See also Eph 6:19; Phil 1:14.

²³ See, for example, Acts 7: 50 (Isa 66: 2); Heb 1: 10 (Ps 102: 25); Acts 4: 28, 11:21.

²⁴ 'One of the distinctions between public and private prayer is that in public prayer we pray as a community and for the common concerns of the community' (Old, 1995, 175).

²⁵ As Solomon would succeed David as king, his faithfulness and involvement in the construction of the temple was a matter of public concern.

²⁶ Howard Marshall comments, 'Although the prayer is ascribed to the church as a whole, it is hard to believe that a whole group could speak together in this way ... It is, therefore, more likely that one person spoke in the name of the whole company' (Marshall, 1980, 103).

²⁷ For a discussion of prophecy see Fee, 595-596; and 'Prophecy: A First Note in the Context of Chapter 12 (12:10)' in Thiselton, 956-965; and 'Prophecy: A Second Note in the Context of Chapter 14', *idem*, 1087 – 1094;

²⁸ Braun, 284

²⁹ 'The praying of the minister ... is not something done merely privately. It is rather something one does as a minister of Christ, in the name of Christ. Leading in prayer is one of those services to which the minister has been called and set apart' (Old, 1995, 5).

³⁰ 'The Bible contains a vast number of paradigms for prayer and a thesaurus of words to handle the unique expression of prayer. All this inspires, encourages, and feeds our experience of prayer' (Ibid., 7).

Hearing God's Words

– Exploring Biblical Spirituality

Review Article by Gordon Kennedy, Stranraer
on Peter Adam's book

Hearing God's Words – Exploring Biblical Spirituality by Peter Adam is published by Apollos, Leicester, 2004. 237 pp. £12.99 ISBN 1-84474-002-1

Having written an excellent book on the ministry of God's word (*Speaking God's Words* IVP:1996) Peter Adam has done the church a great service by turning his studies towards the hearing of God's words. This is the sixteenth volume in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series being published by Apollos and edited by Don Carson. This is a fine contribution to this series and a must-have book for any serious student of the bible who longs to do more than merely study God's words but really hear them.

Following a brief introduction the book has six chapters which offer us (1) a definition of biblical spirituality, (2) and (3) a consideration of Old Testament and New Testament texts as describing or illustrating this biblical spirituality, (4) a consideration of this biblical spirituality in the writings of John Calvin, (5) a helpful discussion of contemporary issues in spirituality and (6) some examples of spirituality. A brief conclusion of only three pages brings the preceding discussion back

to earth with some suggested texts for meditation, and the bibliography which covers thirteen and a half pages is a resource for much further fruitful reading in this field.

Adam begins with his definitions of spirituality and a defence of his claim that spirituality for an evangelical Christians should be biblical.

It should also be the case that if Evangelicals are those who are governed by the principle of *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone, then pure evangelical spirituality ought to be pure biblical spirituality. (26)

With this we would agree. How is an evangelical to discern this 'pure biblical spirituality' from the pages of the bible?

Biblical theology enables us to make good gospel use of every part of the Bible; it has the potential to produce good and rich gospel spirituality, which reflects every facet and every stage of the biblical revelation. Christian spirituality needs biblical theology so that its use of the Bible is coherent, Christian, responsible, and reflects the full literary width and theological depth of the Scriptures. (43)

This is a helpful section in his work where Adam addresses the need for a robust biblical theology and answers the question why this work is included within this series.

The purpose of biblical theology is to treat every part of the Bible as contributing its particular riches to a full understanding of the gospel of Christ, both in promise in the Old Testament, and in fulfilment in the New Testament. For this reason it is entirely appropriate that a series of studies in biblical theology includes a volume on spirituality. (42)

This final quotation is important in two ways. Firstly, it points us towards an understanding of biblical theology which is a whole-bible biblical theology. This is not to be a bit-study of Johannine or Prophetic contributions to an understanding of spirituality, rather the whole testimony of the bible is to be brought to bear upon the subject for only in this way will we gain a full understanding of a biblical perspective. Secondly, we are assured that there is a spirituality to be found in the witness of the bible. In an age much given to spirituality, or even spiritualities, we must have this confidence that there

is a biblical spirituality that can be described from the pages of Holy Scripture. Discerning this biblical spirituality is a work that requires careful and detailed exegesis of the texts of Scripture. The burden of describing this biblical spirituality is borne by the next two chapters.

Given the constraints of the size of this book it is not reasonable to expect Adam to have attempted an exegesis of every text in the Old and New Testaments. Adam seeks to 'study some books of the Old Testament to discover the spirituality they disclose and teach.' (47)

The spirituality that Adam discovers is a spirituality of the word.

From Genesis:

Here is a spirituality of the Word, of the covenant promise of God. The people of God believe the words of God, even when that is all they have. Patriarchal and matriarchal spirituality is a spirituality of the Word. (52)

From the Psalms:

the moving characteristic of the book of Psalms is that it is mostly made up of words of response to God.

Here we are shown the shape of our prayer, lament and thanksgiving. Here we are shown the shape of our spirituality. Here the words of our response are articulated for us. Here are words that resonate with our own humanity formed by God's grace. (60)

This section on the Psalms is especially helpful to anyone seeking to understand the book of Psalms as a unity and learn way of handling the Psalms for preaching and for personal study and meditation. In summary of chapter 2:

Here is an effective spirituality of the Word. As we have studied the Old Testament books of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Jeremiah, we have seen the following features of biblical spirituality: its *content and focus* is God in Christ, its *practice* is hearing

the word of God by faith, its *experience* is that of meeting God in his Spirit-given words, and its *result* is trust in Christ and our heavenly Father. (79)

The section on Luke is an extended exposition of chapter 24 which is wonderfully helpful.

So the teaching of the three stories [in Luke 24] reaches its climax in the third story, where the origin and content of the gospel is made clear. The gospel is foretold in the Old Testament and in Jesus' teaching, and its content is the suffering, death and resurrection of the Messiah/Son of Man, and the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations. The point of the chapter is not just the resurrection of Christ, but the resurrection of Christ as part of the gospel. And the basis for faith is not the empty tomb, an experience of the risen Christ, or the breaking of bread, but the trustworthiness of both the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching. (86)

The application here for a spirituality of the word is obvious. Less obvious is Adam's section on Colossians. Adam introduces this section by suggesting that in the New Testament documents what we have are '... debates about the nature of true Christian spirituality.' He then continues:

We should not think of a 'Colossian heresy', as if it were the thought-out and articulated product of theologians. It was a way of living the Christian life that differed in some important ways from that taught by Paul. Paul's reply is to present full Christian spirituality found in Christ, which is why he uses the language of 'fullness' and 'fulfilled'. He urges the Colossians not to move away from a spirituality based on full gospel truth of the fullness of God in Christ. (90)

Adam then presents 'thirty lessons in true spirituality' to be discovered in the letter to the Colossians. My con-

cern here is that these lessons appear to describe a spirituality of the Christ rather than a spirituality of the word. Adam ends by alluding to Col 3:16, a verse which brings together the word and Christ. However, it may have been helpful for a preacher and bible student of Adam's abilities to demonstrate the hermeneutical steps that led him to offering such a detailed description of the spirituality centred upon Christ in Colossians in a work presenting us with a spirituality of the word. It may be that Adam would point to his conclusions from his study of Revelation:

In summary it is a spirituality that recognizes the presence of Christ among his churches, and submits to the words that come from his mouth. It is a Christ-centred spirituality, communicated from Christ and the Spirit in the words of a prophetic letter, and resulting in praise to God and the Lamb, and the certain expectation of Christ's return. (116f.)

In the church today a spirituality of Christ would not be controversial; however, a spirituality that submits to Christ's words would be highly controversial. It is surely the task of a whole bible biblical theology to demonstrate from a careful exegesis of the bible that such submission to the word of Christ is a spirituality of Christ, if not the spirituality of the word taught us from Scripture.

My concern in both these chapters is the selection of material Adam chooses to study. From the Old Testament Adam studies Genesis, Deuteronomy, Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Jeremiah. Using the common divisions in the Christian bible that is 2 from the 5 books of the Law, 3 from the 5 books of poetry (or wisdom) and 1 from the 17 books of prophets. The obvious omission is the historical books. From the New Testament Adam takes us through Luke, Romans, Colossians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation, which is a better spread of texts from the New Testament. Particularly in the Old Tes-

tament if one started with a desire to discover a spirituality of the word these are the texts one would look to. What about Esther, or Chronicles or Obadiah? The weighting towards the poetic or wisdom texts is particular felt at this point. Of course the challenge simply is to look to these other texts and see if as a result of careful exegesis a spirituality of the word is discovered there.

Turning to Calvin in chapter 4 Adam finds that the spirituality he has discovered in the bible is found also in Calvin. Although Adam does not defend his choice of Calvin as a representative of a tradition of theological exposition of the Christian faith (perhaps for the intended readership of this volume there is no need for such a defence), Calvin's theology of revelation is a thorough exposition of this theme and as always Calvin is careful to control his theology by his study of Scripture. Adam concludes his chapter:

The Bible is God speaking his one Word to all. So faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

In this chapter we have seen the theological basis for the spirituality of the Word as found in the Reformed tradition of John Calvin.

Again we have seen that the content and focus of the spirituality of the Word are God in Christ, its practice is hearing the words of God by faith, its experience is that of meeting God in his words, and it results in trust in Christ and our heavenly Father. (138)

Here is a further answer to the question of how the word of God that is the bible is related to the Christ of God presented in the bible. Adam demonstrates that Christ is the object of both the Old and the New Testaments and so is the content of the word, that word which is the focus of a true Christian spirituality. In Calvin's theology of revelation we find the means to bring together not only Christ and the word but also the Spirit and the word, the

importance of this being that we do not have Christ or the Spirit apart from the word, which is a corrective against many contemporary troubles facing the churches.

In his fifth chapter Adam addresses the question of the form of Christian spirituality. In describing a spirituality of the word Adam is seeking to focus Christian living upon the word of God. This is a proposal that is under considerable attack and is widely discredited. Adam's chapter is a masterly handling of this field, covering sacred images, sacred places and objects, sacred times and actions, and the power of words – including prayer, mysticism and prophecy. Adam writes:

The great barrier to true spirituality is not the lack of technique in spiritual aptitude, but sin. ... God has provided 'means' by which he works in us for his glory. We must make good use of the means provided by God, and not replace or supplement them with means we devise. The means provided by God are explained in the Bible, namely the Bible itself, the fellowship of the people of God, prayer, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and a right use of creation. (173)

And a word of warning:

We should not overvalue the sacraments, those visible words of God. While we hear echoes of the Bible in our inner selves, the God-given and certain place to hear God speaking is in the Bible. (173)

There are not many who would consider themselves evangelical who would tend to an explicit use of other means to engage our spirituality. The danger is rather in non-explicit means whereby we adopt patterns of thinking about places, music, certain gathering or fellowships and invest them with the expectation of engaging our spirituality in a way that is not biblical. On the other hand it is entirely possible that

many of us undervalue the full range of means as described by Adam, it would be helpful to have a treatment of the place of these means within a spirituality of the word that we might engage with these aspects of Christian spirituality in a fruitful way.

In his final chapter, perhaps the highlight of the book, Adam works through three examples of spirituality. It would no doubt be possible to have brought forth further examples, but these three are very helpfully chosen and presented. The three examples are:

- the corporate spirituality of the Word that marked the early church
- the Puritan defence of biblical spirituality against the Quaker attacks on it
- the practice of biblical meditation found in the writings of Richard Baxter. (175)

On the theme of a corporate hearing of the word Adam more than adequately demonstrates that most of the bible was originally written to churches and was heard by congregations worshipping and studying the word together.

This means the primary question is not 'What is God saying to me?' but 'What is God saying to the church?' So therefore a 'spirituality of the Word' will primarily be a corporate or group spirituality, and the question we should ask as we hear the Bible read and preached is 'What is God saying to us?' (175)

In many of our churches we suffer from the 'That didn't really speak to me' syndrome. This individualism of our Christian living and our Christian spirituality needs to be challenged and Adam has given us a biblical pattern to use in re-establishing a biblical spirituality that brings the church together in submission to God's word.

In a long section on the Puritan Quaker division we see again Adam's great ability to present Puritan theology and a careful understanding of the issues at debate from this Puritan period.

What was their fundamental disagreement? It was about the crucial issue of the way in which God speaks to his people. The Puritans believed that God spoke through the Bible, and the Quakers believed that God spoke immediately, and not through the Bible. Both agreed that believing and obeying God's words were crucial: they disagreed about the way in which God communicated his words to his people. (180)

Adam works through the major implications of this division in understanding and comes to a remarkable conclusion:

I have argued that the difference between the Puritans and Quakers on the method that God uses to bring revelation to us was of fundamental importance, because the issue of the means of revelation influences all other doctrines. It leads to radically different understanding of the place where the Spirit reveals Christ, and so to radically different understanding of Christ and his work. If the historical revelation of Christ is lost because the historical revelation of that work through Christ's Spirit in Scripture is lost, then all is lost. Without the Bible the remembered Christ becomes the imagined Christ. (201f.)

Beginning from a difference in understanding the means of revelation there grew a significant difference in the practice of spirituality which results in a different faith.

The short section on Richard Baxter on meditation is the kind of helpful section we all would benefit from reading. Meditation has become a common word used to describe a variety of practices in our contemporary Scotland; few of the uses of this word would come close to reflecting a biblical practice of meditation. In short Adam describes Baxter's model as follows:

It begins with 'consideration' This means thoughtful reflection on the

subject of the meditation, what we might call discerning faith ... Then comes 'soliloquy'. By this Baxter means preaching to oneself, self-exhortation. ... Then comes 'prayer', which in this context means addressing God with praise, thanksgiving, lament or confession. (203)

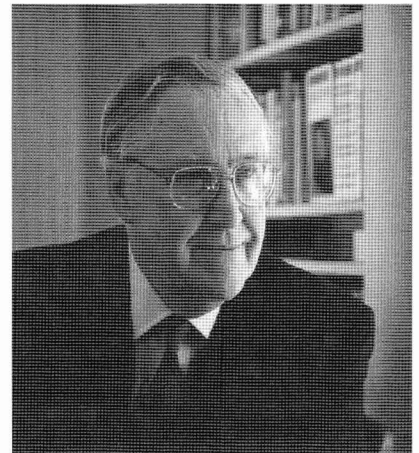
Adam illustrates Baxter's use of this method from a consideration of *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*. That this model of spirituality is one Adam would commend to us is made clear from the concluding pages where Adam offers us a series of verses from Scripture and short quotations from students of Scripture for our meditations.

This book is an excellent example of the careful exegesis of Scripture, reflection upon the lessons of church history and study of systematic theologies that we should long to see more of on our shelves, and on our desks for reading and study. Many will find Dr Adam's work to be an encouragement in their personal experience of true Christian spirituality. Surely it is only from receiving such encouragement and practising this spirituality of the word in our own lives that we are able to teach this spirituality to others.

This extended review is not offered as an alternative to reading and studying Dr Adam's work. This is a highly significant book in many ways. The contribution made to our understanding of Christian spirituality is matched by the contribution made to the disputed field of biblical theology. Does Dr Adam succeed in presenting us with a biblical theology of biblical spirituality? In his series preface Carson describes one area of biblical theology as follows 'the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.'⁽⁹⁾ Certainly Adam describes this biblical theme across part of the biblical material; however, my concerns about the scope of his studies outlined above remain. This is biblical theology in its descriptive mode; a theme is identified and its contours defined across a range of biblical material. In this case there

is also a synthesis of the biblical material to present a unified whole, there is a whole bible biblical spirituality. This biblical theology of spirituality is then used to test the work of church fathers and theologians from earlier times and also to inform, more than that to direct and define what should be contemporary Christian practice in this area. I am not well placed to know how a church historian or a systematic theologian would respond to such a use of biblical theology and would be interested to learn of this.

Our desire as students of the bible is to worship God our Father made known to us through Jesus Christ his Son our Saviour. A study of Scripture informed by this work of biblical theology will be well placed to achieve this goal. There is much for which we are rightly grateful to Peter Adam, this book increases our debt to him and is warmly commended to you all.



Ann Allen meets Eric Alexander

How do we begin to get to grips with the contribution made to the Church by an elder statesman such as Eric Alexander? Where can he be tracked down in the midst of his many international travels? What can we learn from such a renowned bible expositor to encourage us? These were just some of the questions in my mind as I met with Eric Alexander in one of his brief stop overs in Scotland between preaching trips in America and Prague.

Ann: To start at the very beginning, Eric, I have heard anecdotally that your call to the ministry came through the death of your elder brother Tom? Is that the case?

Eric: That was probably one factor but I was actually already licensed as a minister when my brother died. My call to the ministry came almost immediately

after I was converted around the age of 16. My brother had just returned from the forces and his life was so transformed that for the first time in my life I started seeking Christ. It was through him I was converted and turned from my life-long ambition to be a doctor to respond to a call to ministry. My brother was my spiritual father and my mentor. He went into ministry and went to St Stephen's Garnethill and was minister there for less than a year when he died at the age of 29.

Ann: Such a bereavement must have had a profound effect upon you, Eric.

Eric: Yes it did. Nothing has had such a profound effect on my life as that, I think. It was obviously a huge trial for us all to go through. My parents had been brought to faith by Tom as well. We became a Christian family through his witness. I think it would be true to

say that none of us ever grew so much or gained as much spiritually as we did through Tom's death.

Ann: This all happened as you were finishing your academic training for ministry?

Eric: Yes. Because of Tom's death I did not pursue further studies which would have taken me away from the family but took up the opportunity of an assistantship with Arthur Gunn at St David's Knightswood. It was a hugely significant period in my training and I stayed there for four years.

Ann: What made this such a defining period for you?

Eric: Arthur Gunn was from New Zealand, a truly remarkable man. He had been a missionary in China and became a fighter pilot in the Second World War and then came to New

College to train for the Church of Scotland ministry. He was one of the most genuinely humble and genuinely godly men I have known. It was a huge privilege to be alongside him in ministry for that time and learn from him. I left that church when they called a new minister to replace Arthur who had returned to New Zealand. Then I had a problem! I was looking for a church and no church was looking for me!

Ann: That is so hard to believe!

Eric: I actually had good experiences despite the uncertainties of that year. I had the joy of being newly married. I lectured for a few months in the then BTI, and undertook student missions in various universities. Then one Sunday I was preaching in St George's-Tron for Tom Allan when 11 men trooped into the vestry after the morning service. They were a vacancy committee from Loudoun East Church Newmilns so there I went in 1962.

Ann: Did these 11 men have any idea what and who they were getting as their new minister?

Eric: No they didn't. I think they were finding it very difficult to find anybody so I was a kind of last resort! I went there and at my induction interestingly it was my two predecessors at the Tron who spoke – Tom Allan and George Duncan. Tom Allan had grown up in Newmilns.

Ann: You went there, Eric, with five years of varied experience behind you. Did you have a clear plan and strategy for ministry or did you let that pattern evolve?

Eric: I realised I was from a very different background. I had been in a biblical and expository ministry with Arthur Gunn and had had huge freedom with that congregation preaching to people who wanted to be taught.

When I went to Newmilns I discovered my predecessor had preached

for seven minutes! I found myself challenged by that! But I did deliberately preach for a much shorter time in these early days – though some might find that hard to believe. I also realised that I needed to start fairly much at basics with them. I discovered that everyone in Newmilns knew the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm because they learned that at school so I preached systematically through the Lord's Prayer in the mornings and when I started an evening service, because there was none when I went there, I preached through the 23rd Psalm. I discovered that people were hungry and wanted to understand the bible better.

I understood my call to commit me in two ways; a commitment to the Church of Scotland and a commitment to a biblical and expository ministry. I discovered when I became a Christian that the bible spoke to me in the most powerful way and I became more and more convinced that this Word preached was the instrument that God would use in transforming lives.

Ann: In the early days were there more discouragements than encouragements?

Eric: We saw fruit but it took quite a time. There was much ploughing to do. The fifteen years there were good years. Many of them would have said to me in the first months, 'You need to realise that no one gets converted here!' We did not have a prayer meeting for three years because there would have been no one to come. Then we began a Wednesday bible study and prayer meeting and there were a number of people whose hearts the Lord opened. Seven years into my ministry, we had a very significant IVF mission led by Sinclair Ferguson whom I had never met at that time. He asked me to meet him on the golf course to discuss the mission without telling me he was a star golfer. The impact of that mission lasted throughout the years. Significantly at that time I received a call to Westminster Chapel and I had to grap-

ple with that but it became absolutely clear to me that God had further work to do in Newmilns and I should stay. That was a real turning-point in many ways.

Ann: You did not have any other kinds of outreach or evangelism apart from the consistent teaching of the word, did you?

Eric: No. You think of applying the scripture to the needs of the people before you, many of whom have little experience of personal faith, and find that people will tell you that they came to faith and understanding through hearing the word. The battle is to apply the word in all its power and relevance.

Ann: If there are those reading this who are at the start of their ministry what principles would you share with them as being foundational?

Eric: Wherever one goes in ministry the primary need of the people is for the word of God.

The primary instrument God uses is the scripture and the preaching of it and however few the results appear to be you have to stick with it. I believe you 'stick to your last' and keep to the work of expounding relevantly. It has to be done thoroughly because whatever stage the people are at you need to work at digging out from scripture truths for them. And you need an unshakable faith in the saving sanctifying power of the word of God. People would tell me they were brought to faith through the preaching of a passage of scripture no one would have called evangelistic!

You also need to give yourself to the people. They need to know God loves them and you love them and therefore the idea that a first charge becomes a jumping off ground for somewhere more important is really a disaster. I was troubled at a certain stage in my time at Newmilns when people would write and ask me when I was going to

move to somewhere more strategic! But whose strategy was that? God's strategy was the only one that interested me and only when he called me away would I go. When in 1977, fifteen uncomfortable-looking strangers appeared in the pews of Newmilns and announced they were the vacancy committee of St George's-Tron my roots in Newmilns were shaken for the first time in fifteen years and I recognised God was calling me to a new ministry.

Leaving Newmilns was a cross between a bereavement and a surgical operation. I really found it desperately difficult but I was sure God was in this.

Ann: The Tron, city centre, a totally different scenario to rural town parish ministry ?

Eric: The preaching burden was the same, two Sunday services and a mid-week bible study but the congregation was totally different. They were three distinct groups: the membership, many longstanding families, the visitors who came in large numbers with no commitment to the congregation but looking for a strong biblical ministry and the third group were students who came in increasing numbers. The application of the word of God is so important. Our task is not just to expound the text and leave it there but to apply it to those who are hearing. There were huge needs represented. Many needed to come to Christ. There was a further need for committed Christians to grow. On Wednesdays we could have around 200 at bible study and my goal then was to lead the people towards maturity. There were also business people only in Glasgow during the week and the lunchtime monthly services were a source of amazing contacts. At these outreach services I would preach on the person and work of Christ answering basic questions about faith.

Ann: Do you think there is still a significant need for support for a city centre church when many

suburban churches would value an influx of Christians to help them?

Eric: At times I would advise people that if their local church was biblical in conviction and engaged in bible teaching then that might be where they could best serve and be nurtured. In the years of my ministry it was however my increasing conviction that there was a need for a city-centre ministry. I realised that we probably needed to multiply the staff to cope with all the different needs we had to meet.

We could have employed a full time pastoral worker, a student minister. There were large numbers of outwardly needy people. There were others in recognised categories of drug dependencies and the ministry of Hugh and Maureen McKenna and Open Door Trust was hugely influential amongst folks and impacted our congregation for good in a multitude of ways. It is a huge challenge to a church to be open-hearted to everyone who comes. I have a personal abhorrence of 'class distinction' which sadly has so often marked the church, and feel a congregation should embrace people from every kind of background and experience and be able to minister to them.

Ann: Alongside the responsibility of leadership at the Tron, you were involved in an increasingly influential international ministry. What lessons have you learned from different cultures?

Eric: The first major sortie was through my connections with OMF when I was chairman of their Scottish Council. I was invited to Indonesia to preach for six weeks to pastors of the reformed church there. That meant applying the principles I was living by to a totally different culture.

For example it was obvious that literally hundreds of people had been converted sometimes in people groups, whole villages together. I realised that here was a real work of grace that God had done, as in times of revival.

That emphasised for me the need for a teaching ministry to build up and grow these young immature Christians. David Ellis met that need in part by getting material translated and available for pastors.

Most of my other ministry has been in the USA, starting with Urbana, the immense student conference in Illinois. I then became involved in the Philadelphia Conference for Reformed Theology and James Boice, its instigator, became my closest friend in America.

Ann: What is your take on the reformed church in America?

Eric: My experience is fairly narrow since I have been largely to churches which have a reformed basis. Churches vary enormously in America as they do here. Generally I'm very impressed by what I see in reformed Baptist and in PCA churches and EPC.

What impresses me however is the willingness of evangelical Christians to come from all over the area to conferences of bible teaching. They come in their thousands and they pay a serious amount of money to sing hymns and listen to fairly strong meat in teaching terms. There is nothing remotely 'gimmicky' on offer. And I ask myself where in the UK would we find such committed numbers willing to commit time, and money to attend such conferences for these are not people in frontline ministry positions. They are ordinary members from ordinary churches hungry enough to be there.

What also interests me is the calibre of their theological seminaries. I think of places like Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and California, Covenant Seminary in St Louis, and many others. I have almost lost count of them. I have found amongst their staff a commitment firstly to personal godliness and secondly to theological and biblical education and training for people for ministry.

That is one area where we in Scotland have huge difficulty today.

Ann: What would your answer to that very pressing problem be?

Eric: I would create separate seminaries for training for ministry. I think we made a great mistake as a church by abdicating our responsibility for training our ministers and handing over their training to the universities. I think it is right and proper for us to have secular universities but it is wrong to conclude that the people in these universities are the best people to train our ministers. Seminaries in the States are recognised by the denomination and are free to teach and train to teach those called to ministry. I think this may be a significant factor contributing to the strength of the church in the USA.

Ann: Now in retirement and able to have something of an overview of the church on Scotland, are you hopeful or despairing?

Eric: Both! I see churches which make me bow my head and thank God for all I am seeing. I see other situations which make me think if that is where the future of the church lies then I despair. I think it would be the same in America or anywhere else in the world. There seem to be some churches where there is a zeal for God, a primary concern for his glory, a commitment to meet spiritual needs with spiritual methods and a desire to press on with the teaching of the Word which is seen to be the sword of the spirit.

Then in some places we are failing to recognise that some of the needs burdening us are spiritual needs. Since we as evangelicals know that this is God's work and not our work, then God's work needs to be done God's way. Above all else the primary place we apply to get the work done is to God – not any other group or individual. Therefore the primary task of the church, which I fear has become supplemental rather than fundamental, is to pray. I have seen this as one of the evidences that God is at work that prayer has been a priority.

I have just returned from a church in Dallas and on the three occasions I have been there I have found an overwhelming sense of God's presence. It would be the first thing to come into your mind – God is in this place. Now there are many other places I have been both in America and here, where sadly the first thing to strike me is not the presence of God but his absence.

Ann: What factors determined your retiral at 65 – still vigorous and strong in preaching.

Eric: I was aware of the heavy responsibility I bore in the Tron, and as a senior person it is hard to get someone to tell you it is time to stop. Most people give up heavy responsibilities at 65 and I decided that despite excellent health I should go. My tiredness was one factor. The many invitations to do other things and preach in other places were pressing. It was the right time to move into new opportunities that God has given me. I have met people in a huge variety of situations and it has proved busier than I could ever have anticipated. It is hugely encouraging to find that God has still something for me to do.

Ann: What about writing? We'd queue up to buy your books!

Eric: I'm under pressure to write but the spoken word is a very different medium from preaching. I feel I don't have a gift of writing. The gifts of speaking and writing are very different. I remember John Stott telling me 'he was with child of a book' – I have never been in that condition! Thirdly, I see the huge amount of effort friends of mine put into writing and I don't see the niche that is waiting for the publication of my work. I would have a dread of being 'remaindered'!

Ann: Throughout your long ministry how have you sustained and maintained your own spiritual life? Which disciplines have privately sustained your public ministry?

Eric: I think I'd have to say that the example of my brother has in a sense never left me and I knew that for him withdrawing from everyone and everything to pray in secret was his secret. That was something I had to learn. My children were grossly irritated by the snib on my study door! Strangely there is a habit that has almost disappeared, and that is 'journalling'. From the beginning I found this a huge help. I wrote to myself, I tried to assess how I had reacted in situations. I expounded scripture into it not for public sermons but for my own benefit, I prayed into it. I found it invaluable. Older generations did this. After my brother died I found some things he had written. I remember just four words he had written for example in a journal he had kept. They were 'Lord, take me on', and that was my heartcry also.

Ann: His brother left us a wonderful legacy in bringing Eric to faith and God in his grace has used Eric's ministry to build up countless people. We thank God that Eric is still seeking to be 'Taken on' and the challenge for us is to have that same heart cry as we journey with the Lord.

God is Still on

A Study of Habakkuk

On September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers in the heart of New York collapsed as suicidal assassins rammed planes full of terrified people into them. Since then the expression '9/11' refers to that moment which changed the way we look at the world and heralded times of danger and uncertainty. Such a time of danger and fear is the setting for the prophet Habakkuk who wrestles with the huge question of where is God and what is he saying in a little book which is a living Word not just for his day but for ours.

We know nothing about Habakkuk except for this book which bears his name. He is one of the 'Book of the Twelve' whom we, rather unfortunately, call 'Minor Prophets'. They are 'minor' only in size because they grapple with large issues. He describes his book as an 'oracle' or 'burden', which has sense both of a heavy task and an important message. He 'saw' this; it was from God and it was his task to open people's eyes to reality.

His main theme is the catastrophe of the Exile, that time in 587BC when the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, burned the Temple and took the people away to Babylon. This event struck at the heart

of Israel's faith and life. Was the God who rescued them from Egypt and defeated the gods of Egypt (Exod. 12:12) now weaker than the gods of Babylon? What about the promise to Abraham that the land would belong to him and his descendants for ever, since they were now back in the very land he had left? What about the promise to David that his sons would reign for ever on his throne? What about the Temple and all it symbolised of God's presence with his people?

This study of Habakkuk is a digest of four sermons preached last summer in Holyrood Abbey Church, Edinburgh. The message of Habakkuk is vital for us today in uncertain and challenging times. It also demonstrates the value of the study and teaching of the whole Bible, for this little book has many things to teach us. I shall follow the outline of the four sermons and the main points made although clearly there is not space here to linger on many of the points as was the case when they were preached.

A word would be useful on the structure of the prophecy which is a dialogue between God and the prophet:

Habakkuk's First Lament: 1:1-11
God's First Answer: 1:5-11

Habakkuk's Second Lament: 1:12-2:1

God's Second Answer: 2:2-20

Habakkuk's Prayer: 3:1-19

We shall now examine the book in four parts:

1. HOW LONG, O LORD (1:1-11)

This question of the prophet sums up his fear, anxiety and sense of frustration. 'How long?' is also a question which occurs in many of the Psalms and expresses the hopelessness of situations where there appears to be no end to the pressure and where God does not appear to be answering. It is this question which Habakkuk addresses to the Lord. There are two issues here:

• **The mystery of God's inactivity:** Habakkuk is talking of the grim days leading to the Fall of Jerusalem and one of the most disturbing things is the growth of violence (v. 2). But surely that is always true; when human beings turn from God violence is always one of the consequences. But more terrifying is God's apparent indifference: 'Why do you tolerate wrong?' (v. 3). God seems unable to answer prayer and to control evil. This is a recurring

the Throne

Bob Fyall

problem; what happens when our experience of God does not match our theology of God?

• **The mystery of God's activity (vv. 5–11):** As we come to the Lord's first answer, the mystery deepens. God does not dispute Habakkuk's analysis of events, rather he says that events already in motion are bringing the answer to the prophet's prayer, but the answer seems worse than the problem. The Babylonian invasion is not an accident of history but an act of God. Paul quotes this passage in Acts 14:31 and shows how the apparent injustices of history are all overruled by God's providence and especially those events at the centre of history culminating in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that Babylonian conquest was a good thing in itself, but rather that they serve as instruments of God's judgement but will themselves be judged. They think they are in control: 'guilty men whose own strength is their god' (v. 11). We need to remember in our own day in the face of the great forces of secularism, humanism and unbelief that 'God does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth' (Dan. 4:35). We need to take the long view and re-

alise that God is working his purposes out and that one day he will set up his kingdom.

2. WHAT WILL HE SAY? (1:12-2:1)

The problem now is different: God has given an answer but what an answer, and this is what is addressed in Habakkuk's second lament. The structure of this section is in fact a model of how to handle such a time of perplexity. Habakkuk asks three questions:

• **Is God who we believe he is? (vv. 12–13a)** This is the fundamental question in all our praying. He is LORD, the God committed to his people by promises that he will not and cannot break. He is eternal and so above and beyond temporary circumstances. He is the Rock on whom we can build our lives. He is holy, and this is the whole problem – why does he allow, indeed raise up a more wicked nation to punish a less wicked one? Only the cross will supply an answer to that question.

• **Are things as bad as they seem? (vv. 13b–17)** In one sense they are worse with cruelty and greed evident on every side. Why do the wicked prosper and why is the waiting time so

long? Many will know that experience only too well.

• **Is there another way to look at it? (2:1)** There is another prospective, the vision of faith. In Durham I used to teach in St John's College, a characterful but cramped building in a cobble mediaeval street overshadowed by the great bulk of Durham Cathedral. However, if you climbed the Cathedral Tower you would have a tremendous space with much of northern England spread out to view. So here Habakkuk takes himself up to 'the ramparts' to escape from the immediate situation. But there is more to it than that. The prophet is waiting for a word from God and recognises the need for revelation: 'I will look to see what he will say to me' (2:1) because he believes the final word has not yet been spoken.

3. THE SILENT EARTH (2:2-20)

The Lord's second answer does not rebuke Habakkuk for his audacity but begins to unfold the deeper meaning of events. This is 'revelation' (v. 2); there is still much mystery but there is enough light to live by:

• **Waiting for God (vv. 2-3)** This is not aimless waiting in the hope that 'something will turn up'. God has given a revelation which is to be inscribed on tablets and thus permanently preserved. But preserved does not mean exhibiting it in a glass case; it is a gospel to proclaim 'so that a herald may run with it'. The way to be faithful to the unchanging word is to preach it and let it do its work. This message is 'of the end', which is more than the end of the Exile and looks to the Day of the LORD when all the dark things will be made plain. There will be a 'delay' from the human perspective, but that is because we do not yet see the whole picture.

• **Living without God (vv. 4-20)** The phrase 'but the righteous shall live by his faith' (v. 4) stands out by way of contrast to the rest of this section. The way of faith is hard in the world the prophet describes which is why so many take the way of selfishness and ungodliness. The way of life which is not the way of faith has a number of 'woes' pronounced on it. 'Woe' is a word about ultimate destiny and is the opposite of 'blessed'. The just will live truly in the world to come. When the end arrives the true nature of faith will be demonstrated.

Habakkuk catalogues a number of characteristics of living without God. It is marked by greed and exploitation, covetousness, violence and debauchery. It is too easy for us to distance ourselves from these and to denounce racketeers, crooked financiers, violence and feel that we are not guilty about these particular sins. However, there is a deeper issue.

Verse 18 seems to go off at a tangent with its talk of idols, but Habakkuk knows well that idolatry is the root cause of all the other sins. We might think it is a harmless eccentricity compared to exploitation and violence. We could not be more wrong. Idolatry is deadly for two reasons. First it opens the door to unreality: turning from the living God to a dead idol. From the God who speaks to the idol which is

dumb. What point is there in raising the huge issues with which the prophet is wrestling with an idol who cannot hear, cannot answer and cannot help.

Second, and more serious, it opens the door to Satan. But, if an idol is nothing, how can it harm? The Devil uses idols as a cover for his own purposes, and for his favourite work which is teaching lies (v. 18). Think of the disastrous consequences of lies: whether political lies, such as communism and Nazism or theological lies, such as capturing the pulpits, theological colleges and faculties for the propagation of error.

However, God is about to speak from his 'holy temple' which is both Zion and the whole earth and one day that earth is to be 'filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (v. 14).

4. SEEING GOD (3:1-19)

Some argue this is not part of the original prophecy because, like other psalms, it has a title (v. 1) and a postscript (v. 19). Yet in 2:20 God is in his temple; indeed perhaps the whole dialogue has taken place there. Here the prophet draws on the big picture and deals with the questions raised in Chapters 1 and 2. The prophet calls on God to renew his mighty works 'in the midst of the years' (twice in v. 2). Probably in the time between Exodus and Exile, but also pointing to that greater event of the death and resurrection of Christ which was to strike the death blow to evil and point to that event yet future to us as it was to Habakkuk which is to bring in God's kingdom.

This is a glorious poem and it is in the atmosphere of praise and worship Habakkuk meets God and passes on the message. The psalm develops in three movements:

• **Who God is (vv. 1-7)** The question is not simply does God answer prayer, but who is he? Habakkuk here presents two great realities about God which are at the heart of the Old Testament:

God is Creator and God is Saviour. He is light and his presence reveals reality (vv. 3-6). The Babylonian armies look rather less impressive now. Here we also have a foreshadowing of his final coming which will be like lightning (Matt. 24:27). Teman and Paran (v. 3) are the hilly country between Gulf of Aqabah and Sinai, the country of the Exodus and v. 7 carries on to the conquest of Canaan. God is active in time and space and his purposes will be fulfilled.

• **What God does (vv. 8-15)** Here we have echoes of the 'Song of the Sea' (Exodus 15) which Moses sang as he praised God for the rescue of the people from Pharaoh's army. Again we have elements of dialogue with God with echoes of the exodus story. Here we have the Lord's conquest of evil. Rivers, streams and sea (v. 8) are not simply natural phenomena but the haunt of evil, as in Daniel 7 where the four beasts emerge from the Great Sea. We have echoes as well of the Flood Narrative and such Psalms as 77 and 93.

Yet this is saving activity: 'You went out for the salvation of your people' (v. 13). Judgement and salvation are two sides of the same coin. 'The leader of the land of wickedness' (v. 13) represents not only Pharaoh and the Babylonians but all hostile powers, past, present and future.

• **What are we to do? (vv. 16-19)**

Here is a portrait of the one who lives by faith (2:4). There are two elements here. The first is a sense of awe (v. 16) where the prophet trembles at the greatness and majesty of God. The second is joyful trust which is not dependent on circumstances but on God himself (vv. 17-19). Habakkuk is now climbing mountains with the agility of a deer because God is his strength.

This little book will repay study; it will give new confidence in the Lord and a new desire to know him and make him known.

Letter to my Congregation

Peter Dickson, Aberdeen

Dear Friends
Easter flies past as school holidays begin, and this year it will have come and gone more quickly being, as it is, at the end of March. It is a valuable opportunity to rejoice in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. But unless we are clear in our own minds, Easter, like any Christian festival or event could become a token, an empty ritual.

It is sometimes easy, particularly for people like me, to be overcome by a desire to abolish all Christian festivals and all special events. There is a sense in which special events, like Easter, are in danger of declaring the normal events of life to be somehow inadequate, dull or tedious. We look forward to one special event after another, plan and prepare for the next big date, and in the meantime a hundred days of joy in the presence of God himself slip by without us noticing what God is doing or listening to what he is saying in his word.

However, the danger of abolishing all special events in the church is that we could be easily perceived to be freakish, peculiar; people to be ignored as a peculiar and obscure group who are neither in touch with or even remotely interested in the real world of people who need to know the real God.

What choice do we have then? We must proclaim the sacred nature of the

most humdrum days, and we must lavishly rejoice in every valid and genuine opportunity the special events of life afford us. The only possible way we can do that is to place the preaching and teaching of God's word so fully and forcibly at the centre of both normal and special events that whatever we are doing God is heard to be speaking.

I find it fascinating that nominal Christians (who want less than the gospel in church) and fanatical Christians (who want more than the gospel in church) seem to have a low opinion of the normal and a very high opinion of the special or one-off event.

Nominal Christians swarm to church like bees round a honey pot when there is a Carol service, a wedding or some event in life when it is felt appropriate to seek the blessing of the God who can usually be safely ignored at other times. Fanatical Christians swarm to a conference or meeting to hear a special speaker when it is felt that God is going to grant some extra blessing which he would usually, presumably by matter of mundane course, withhold.

It does seem clear from scripture (whatever view you take on Sabbath keeping and the relationship between Old and New Testaments) that what God is interested in is permanent and pure fellowship with his people in a world where the constancy of his love,

and the faithfulness of his word are a foundation for the whole of life, not merely for special occasions.

The ups and downs of life which are so often caused by circumstances which we have no control over, should not be caused by our blowing hot and cold in our love for God. Of course there are special days, special seasons, special events in the life of a church, but what is marked out as singularly special by God is the miraculous but normal meeting of the family on one day each week.

We feel a constant need to dream up new and ever more dazzling signs, symbols, worship styles and ways of 'doing church'. How often do we thereby proclaim to the world that the ways of worshipping God which God himself appointed for the children he loves are in our mind outdated, dull, irrelevant and worthy of being replaced.

Baptism, communion, the word of God, gathering for prayer. These simple, ordinary, old, predictable, known and familiar things are the most special events in the life of the family of God. If we think we can have more special than these then we have declared that we know more about what is special than God does. And considering that God gave his Son to die in our place that would be an astonishingly arrogant declaration to make.

Your minister and friend,

Peter Dickson

Book Reviews

Listening to the Soul

Sandra Holt

SPCK, London, 2002. 135pp. £8.99

ISBN 0 7281 05459 2

This is a well-written little book, which in 11 short chapters seeks to help us understand who we are and why we are here by drawing parallels between our own lives and the life of Jesus. Just as Jesus grew into a realisation of his person and purpose through his encounters with others, so the reader is encouraged to do the same, and thus discover his true identity and God's purpose for him in life.

I liked the author's personal and honest style which allowed me to get to know her a little and to identify with her in the ups and downs of family life. The description of the soul as being outside of the body certainly made me sit up and think about the whole concept and was very helpful. I felt uncomfortable, however with some of the references to God as 'She', but must admit they certainly made me think more about 'His' attributes.

I took a while to get into this book and found it hard to follow some of the thinking of Ignatius, and Thomas Merton, with the latter being quoted in nearly all of the early chapters. However, many of the Scripture references are from Peterson's excellent translation and these certainly fitted in well with the general style of writing.

The penultimate chapter is far and away the best in the whole book as the reader is encouraged to answer Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?' and so to discover for himself, his own true identity in Christ.

All in all, this is a book which will challenge you in your thinking about Jesus as a person and about yourself and help you to bring the two together.

Scott Guy, Aberdeen

Emmaus – the Way of Faith

Stephen Cottrell, Steven Croft, John Finney, Felicity Lawson, Robert Warren
Church House Publ, London; 2nd edition 2004.

Leaders' Resources: £5.95

ISBN 0 7151 4025 6

Resource Material: 5 volumes, various prices from £15 to £22.50

The Emmaus material provides a wealth of resource material that will allow churches to grow and to nurture people in Christian faith and discipleship. First published in 1996, this second edition, published in 2004, has made some changes to the format and design, but the original concept remains the same.

There is a helpful little booklet for nurture group leaders. This teases out, all too briefly, some of the issues and questions of leading a nurture group. 'What does it mean to be a leader?' Jesus' model of 'adult education' is described in five pages; the dynamics of a group are analysed in a helpful, if superficial, way.

There are five volumes of resource material. The first of these is a Basic Christian faith course, in fifteen sessions. The other volumes all include a variety of short courses for growing Christians: topics such as 'living the gospel', 'growing in prayer', 'being church', 'personal identity' and 'the Beatitudes' are all covered along with many others; some fifteen courses in all. There are handouts for every session of every course, along with additional material of other kinds as appropriate; these are all now on CD-Rom to be printed and then copied as the need arises.

It would seem, at first, that there is too much material here for many ordinary congregations. Very few congregations would be able to run all of these courses, either one after the other, or as parallel options. Nonetheless, there is here a most valuable resource for discussion groups, Bible Study, equipping church leadership and vision building, personal study, as well as sermon material for preachers. There is material here to grow a church in so many different ways. The whole package will cost about £100, but it would be such a sound investment for the future of the church.

For me, the strength of this material is that there is no video and no script. It is flexible and adaptable to every situation and group and can be used both by groups and individuals – I use it in membership preparation. This does present a challenge: it needs leaders who are able to think through how to use the material and add their own illustrations and examples. If you want a 'pull-off-the-shelf-ready-made' course, this is not for you, but if you want a nurture resource that you can use in your own way, (adding your own jokes!), then this is great material. I have used some of this material in my own congregation and the people have found it challenging and stimulating; we have seen people grow stronger in faith and become better equipped to follow Jesus in every part of their lives.

James S. Dewar, Edinburgh.

Glimpsing the Face of God

Alister McGrath

Lion, Oxford, 2003. 95pp. £4.99

ISBN 0 7459 5142 2

There is a danger that this little book by Alister McGrath will be missed as his surprisingly large output of books gets greater and greater. That would be a pity. It is a useful book putting the case for Jesus Christ being the way to understand the meaning of the existence and history of the cosmos and thus give hope for the natural world especially its human inhabitants.

It is a book of gentle apologetics where he seeks to take by the hand the honest and thoughtful enquirer and lead him/her to the gospel as the key to ultimate understanding. He does this without polemic or even criticism of secular thinkers. Although the book engages with familiar issues of philosophy, theology and the 'science-God' discussion, it does so without recourse to technical terms of any kind. He uses helpful illustrations from varied sources, which include poetry and even detective novels.

It is divided into twelve brief chapters. In these chapters the reader is encouraged to think of the following questions and themes:

1. The vast, awesome and beautiful universe – does it force us to consider our own lives as short and meaningless or does it prompt us to seek a meaning beyond it?

2. What clues do we see in our own lives and that of the wider cosmos? Do they not lead us in different directions?

3. The inadequacy of postmodernism; the inevitable quest for the big picture; how big pictures in science cope with their own difficulties.

4. The explanatory power of the Christian worldview as it relates to the order of nature, the human mind and its need for God.

5. The contrast between the abstract transcendent world of Plato and the deeply personal revelation of God in Christ.

6. The teaching of Jesus opens the window of ultimate reality. His Divine-human nature and his resurrection from the dead give him authority to speak to us of the world beyond the grave.

7. The objective reality of both natural and moral law must point us to a Lawgiver.

8. Our failure to keep the moral law is dealt with in the death of Christ. Here we are given short but useful survey of the history of theories of the atonement.

9. The problem of pain and the Christian response: God's solidarity with our suffering and the reality of Christian hope.

10. The need for doctrine (for example the doctrine of 'The Trinity') to inform our mind and keep our Christian beliefs balanced and focussed.

11. Just as roads at the edge of a map seem to be converging at a place beyond the map, so we are directed to the as yet unseen New Jerusalem.

12. The moth sees the light of the stars but cannot reach them. Instead it gets burnt as it goes to the hot lights in the street and home. We too must beware of directing our spiritual quest in wrong directions. We cannot prove the truth of our big story but once we make the decision of faith we find ourselves on a journey that leads to the discovery of truth.

I certainly recommend this book. It has no index but it is well written and has a moving ending.

Howard Taylor, Edinburgh

The Message of Zechariah

Barry Webb

IVP, Leicester, 2003. 188pp. £9.99

ISBN 0 85111 294 3

A typical paragraph from the introduction gives a flavour of the quality of Dr Webb's writing, and the clarity of his teaching style. *We shall begin by considering its Structure, which is just another way of asking the question, 'What are its main units and how are they related to one another?' The details will have to wait until we read it more closely, but it will help us to tackle this basic question in a preliminary way here. A 'bird's eye view', or a map, can be a helpful way of becoming familiar with new territory!* (p. 30)

Zechariah's prophecy is relatively unfamiliar territory to many full time ministers, and it is certainly a foreign country to most congregations. Dr Webb is an outstanding guide to the landscape. It is a delight to travel through Zechariah in the company of such a gracious teacher and seasoned fellow traveller. Time and again it is clear that he has been this way before. Every step along the route he takes trouble to establish the big picture, before delving into the details. He is sufficiently sure-footed to do justice to both. If there is ever a danger of the reader becoming breathless (and we are in Zechariah 1), he routinely anticipates the need for a pause, and, after a gentle summary, a brief look back across the territory just covered, and an encouraging glimpse of what is to come, we move on. Dr Webb's literary sensitivity, his linguistic ability, and his skilful use of suitable imagery remind this reader of Derek Kidner's remarkable facility with words. This is an outstanding volume in the *Bible Speaks Today* series.

Jonathan Jukes, Kirk Ella

The Message of Mission

Howard Pskett and Vinoth Ramachandra

IVP, Leicester, 2003. 288pp. £9.99

Book Reviews

ISBN 0-85111-326-5

This book is part of the third series of IVP the *Bible Speaks Today* books dedicated to certain key biblical themes. All BST contributors share the conviction that God still speaks through what he has spoken and of the vital need to listen to what he has to say. Pskett and Ramachandra, one a Westerner with wide knowledge of Asia, the other an Asian with wide knowledge of the West, and both with extensive experience of international and cross-cultural mission, elucidate a further conviction: that the grand narrative of the Bible can be summarised in the sentence 'God makes and chooses a people for himself, so that he may be glorified throughout the world.'

The book is a selection of 15 expositions of Scripture passages all converging on the grand narrative outlined above. It is divided into four further divisions, which I did not find particularly helpful. The passages expounded are seven from the Old Testament and eight from the New Testament. Inevitably there is a subjective selectivity in this, which generally works well. I found many of the expositions heart-warming and easy to read but there was a glaring omission of any consideration of Genesis 3 and the Fall. Any discussion of mission which omits the Fall will struggle to provide a loyal reflection of the biblical storyline.

In the preface the authors state boldly that they have interpreted the term 'mission' widely in accordance with their understanding of the Bible and they go on to admit that this understanding is wider 'than some mission and evangelistic agencies may find comfortable'. That was certainly true for this reviewer but the authors are more in the centre of the spectrum of current world church opinion on that matter. The difficulty arises because although mission is an integral part of Scripture as the heartbeat of God himself the noun mission is not a Bible word.

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There is much that is very good indeed in this book and we must not underestimate the importance of highlighting the whole Bible as a missionary book and the imperative for all God's people to engage in God's mission. There is however one further weakness that is almost inevitable in thematic studies: the departure in the application from the what the passage itself teaches in order to make valid points made in passages not expounded. Despite this I found this book a helpful addition to my bookshelf.

Andy Lines, London

Alternative Worship

Jonny Baker and Doug Gay with Jenny Brown

SPCK, London, 2003. 134pp. + CD-ROM £15.99

ISBN 0-281-05396-0

While not being altogether enthusiastic about the name 'alternative worship', that has come to describe a particular approach to worship (and to doing Church), the authors are passionately keen on using visuals, the arts, contemporary music, reworked liturgies and rituals in order to help people worship. This is not a catchy 'this will get your young people interested' volume, but is a far more thoroughgoing and serious reflection on how we worship, what helps people express themselves to and before God. The authors are experienced practitioners of what has come to be called 'alternative worship'. Their concern is to reflect on how we do church, and to provide a form of worship that enables people to use their various senses, their imagination, their God-given talents and faculties in worship. It is a movement that has struck a chord with many who have found traditional church stifling and life denying.

The 'Alternative Worship' movement poses hard and serious questions and challenges to the rest of the church. An introductory chapter in this work outlines some of the roots and influences on the movement, how what they are

doing is both serious and has continuity with previous church movements, the Reformation included. The book is then in four parts: the seasons of Advent and Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. In each part there are three sections: resources – a collection of readings, prayers, meditations, reflections, collects; rituals – descriptions of acted acts; reflections – some short treatments on key elements in alternative worship (the use of liturgy, music and images, ritual, language, popular culture and tradition, the incarnation). The book is then rounded off with a postscript giving 100 suggestions for resources and then there is the CD-ROM with over 40 items – loops, moving images, music. Clearly in such a varied work some parts will work better than others – some of the resources material I found contrived and too self-consciously clever or polemical. Others I found very insightful and moving.

Overall, though, what we are given here is a very thoughtful and challenging *apologia* for alternative worship and some excellent ideas and resources in our hands. More importantly we are given the challenge and stimulus to be creative and imaginative in ways that fit our own various contexts and traditions. To those not very involved with the alternative worship movement this is a good tool for understanding and for dialogue. Rather than dismissing it as a bleat from the trendy or the pandering to sensuality or creation spirituality, we would be better to listen and seek to understand and indeed learn. Alan Jamieson's *A Churchless Faith* described the serious situation of concerned and active disciples leaving our churches.

Many of their complaints and concerns overlap with issues raised helpfully and positively here. It would be a failure of leadership and in mission to miss the opportunity to listen and learn and to seriously and faithfully reflect on what we do in worship and why. These authors have done so and we are grateful to them for sharing their fruits of that with us.

Gordon Palmer, Edinburgh

Do Not Go Gentle – poems for funerals

Edited by Neil Astley

Bloodaxe Books, Northumberland, 2003. 96pp. £6.99

ISBN 1 85224 635 9

On two grounds this anthology is a disappointment. The first is that its own sub-title is 'poems for funerals' – but a substantial number of the 93 poems included would not be suitable for any funeral service – Christian or otherwise. To be effective at a funeral service a poem must 'work' on a single hearing in a context in which grief and other strong emotions may already be filtering what is said and heard. But judged by this criterion many of these poems are far too complex, or do not relate to a very recent death. To take two extreme examples I doubt that anyone would ever read DH Lawrence's *Demiurge* (p 40), or Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* (p 71) at a funeral service. To do so would be to invite total incomprehension.

This is a severe criticism because not only the sub-title but also the blurb on the back claim that this anthology is 'specifically for reading at funerals and memorial services.' Only a minority of its contents meet the practical demands of this very precise setting.

My second ground for disappointment is that few of the poems are suitable for *Christian* funerals. To be fair to the book in this case the blurb clearly states it is for churchgoers... agnostics and atheists'. It is no surprise then that many of the poems contradict Christian theology. For example *Epitaph on a Friend* by Robert Burns (p. 26) manages to combine an implied view of salvation by works with grave reservations about the existence of an after-life!

However it is not just Christian theology that is contradicted but, in some cases, Christian pastoral care. Take the last two lines of the highly popular *Do not stand at my grave and weep* (p 38). They say, 'Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there, I did not die.' To enshrine Denial in the funeral service itself seems hardly the best way to help the grieving process.

A surprising omission is the lack of an Index of first lines. This makes the task of finding a poem when the writer is unknown very laborious.

Malcolm Ramsay, Pitlochry

Paul – Missionary Theologian

Robert Reymond

Christian Focus Publications, Tain
2000. 636pp. £9.99

ISBN 1 85792 497 5

A book of 600+ pages is unlikely to commend itself to busy church leaders unless it is capable of being *dipped into* for reference. In supplying a comprehensive handbook to the Apostle Paul's missionary endeavours, an outline of each of the Pauline letters and a systematic survey of his theology, Robert Reymond has succeeded in producing a volume of real usefulness. At the same time his is no dry academic discussion, for throughout the author shows himself to be a man whose heart burns for the lost and who has grasped an authentically Pauline vision for the urgency of communicating God's gospel in God's way to the ends of the earth.

The book comprises two sections – the first gives a portrait of Saul and his conversion, followed by a reconstruction of his missionary journeys, subsequent arrest, imprisonment and eventual martyrdom. The second half explores Paul's missionary theology under twelve subject headings and it here that the author's ability as a systematic theologian comes to the fore. As Reymond carries the reader along his admiration for Paul is apparent alongside his motivation for writing the study: 'it is my earnest prayer, as we follow Paul through his journeys that the Holy Spirit will call some readers to become cross-cultural church planters themselves' (p.116). Reymond concludes by reflecting on lessons to be drawn for Mission today from the model established by Paul and lays down a robust challenge to mind and heart.

This volume is a treasure trove of helpful background, insightful comment and informed discussion to help

the preacher preparing to expound from the Pauline corpus or, indeed, from Acts. Controversial issues are not ducked and the author is unafraid to declare his own view, often bolstering it with multiple arguments e.g. the eighteen reasons adduced in favour of the south Galatian hypothesis! Not everyone will be convinced when this is extended to a bold advocacy of the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, but the writing is always clear and lucid, leaving the reader in no doubt as to the main lines of debate on the question under discussion. His extensive use of quotations from other writers in the field leavens the lump and constitutes in itself one of the most valuable aspects of the work. Reymond takes a systematic rather than a biblical theology approach but nevertheless is concerned to trace the Old Testament roots of Paul's teaching. It is disappointing that he makes so little of Paul's use of the Isaianic categories quoted by Jesus in the Nazareth manifesto, but he does interact helpfully with the debate around the so-called *New Perspective* (he is not persuaded!).

However such debates are not allowed to dominate the discussion because this volume is more than a resource to be used – it constitutes an appeal to be heeded. Throughout he maintains his focus on providing 'students and mission candidates both with their biblical basis for becoming world Christians and in the life of Paul, their best human exemplar of what it means' (p.14). He has provided a study that will richly reward the student who shares his gospel ambition and a reminder to the church of the rock from which we were hewn.

Alan Purser, London

The Message of Creation (Bible Speaks Today)

David Wilkinson

IVP, Leicester, 2002. 296pp. £9.99

ISBN 0 85111 269 2

This book seeks to explore the theme of creation under five main headings:

1. Creation as we find it outlined in the

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first three chapters of Genesis.

2. The songs of creation in Proverbs and Psalms.

3. The Son of God as the Lord of creation is explored *inter alia* with reference to John's prologue and the stilling of the storm.

4. The lessons of creation covering various passages.

5. The fulfilment of creation in the new heaven and earth in such passages as Isaiah 65, Romans 8 and Revelation 21.

There is a short appendix which deals with the 'days' of creation and related issues.

David Wilkinson writes in an easy manner with lengthy illustrations – indeed one gets the feel of a sermon series lying behind the book. Dealing with issues often controversial the author sets out various strands of thought in a clear and concise manner.

However this reviewer felt that often too much was conceded to a liberal interpretation. For example Adam and Eve are presented as figurative rather than real individuals and the general approach to Genesis 1-3 is that of seeing it as a literary device to present theological truths. Again Charles Darwin seems to be accepted as received wisdom and it is claimed that he destroyed the 'design' argument once and for all with his theory of natural selection (page 126). This seems to ignore works such as N. Broom's *How Blind is the Watchmaker* (IVP 2001) – referred to in a footnote on page 26! From a literary point of view the old fashioned concept of JDEP as the literary sources behind the text is too readily left unquestioned.

Nevertheless this book is well worth reading. It comes complete with a study guide (by Eva Chambers) which could make the book useful in discussion groups.

John Sharp, East Kilbride

Preaching Mark in Two Voices

Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles

Book Reviews

Westminster/John Knox, Louisville/
London, 2002. 273pp. £15.99
ISBN 0-664-22393-1

This is a book of unusual genre. Blount (pronounced Blunt) is an African American who teaches New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. Charles is a white Presbyterian pastor of a congregation in a Washington suburb. They are friends, but their experience of life has been very different and it is this difference in perspective that is the key to the book. Two preachers preaching the same text from different perspectives to different congregations will have different things to say. They will preach with two voices.

Mark's Gospel is divided up into twelve sections of various sizes, each of which has three 'views': an exegetical introduction (by one or other author – six each) and a sermon from each author. The exegetical introductions are not to be confused with the genre of commentary. Yes, they comment on the text, but it is comment from the perspective of one about to preach from the text and this view is thus entitled 'From Text to Sermon.' As one would expect the introductions vary in helpfulness but as I was preparing for services in Holy Week I found there were hooks I could hang new thoughts on, which is always welcome after eighteen Holy Weeks in ministry.

The sermons have their origins in a range of situations like congregational worship, graduation worship, an ordination and the funeral service of young man who committed suicide. Mark can be heard in a wide variety of contexts. Few readers of this journal will agree with everything that is preached, and the American contexts into which these words were preached means that some translation work must be done. The people most likely to benefit from this book in the UK are those who seek to emulate Blount and Charles in declaring the Word of the Lord from the Gospel of Mark.

Jared Hay, Balerno

Priorities for the Church – Rediscovering Leadership and Vision in the Church

Donald Macleod
Christian Focus Publications, Tain,
2003. 140pp.
ISBN 1-85792-6935

From the pen of the Principal of the Free Church College comes this characteristically meaty essay in applied theology, witty at times, and always balanced in thinking. Whoever among church members will read it, whether ministers and elders or ordinary folk in the pew, will find edification and enjoyment.

Macleod set out to reassess the function of the church as it moves forward into the 21st century, calling on it to get its house still more properly in order if it is to fulfil its task of both enabling its members to grow in the faith, and to embark on a vigorous evangelism suitable for the ever increasingly postmodernised post Christian era.

The book is 'a short book but it was long in the making', Macleod tells us. Six of the chapters have already appeared as articles in the *Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, and the seventh, 'The basis of Christian Unity', in *Evangel*.

Macleod lays very great stress on the importance of preaching as a priority, devoting three of the first six chapters to this matter, 'Presbyters and Preacher', 'The Primacy of Preaching', and an especially useful article on 'Preaching from the Old Testament'.

The ministry of pastoral preaching is particularly committed to the full time minister. Thus he must be given time to devote himself wholeheartedly to it. For him there must be a cordon sanitaire around the hours from nine to one. They should be absolutely sacred. During these hours the minister should be 'engaged in prayer and study of the Word of God' enjoying the fellowship of the great master preachers and master theologians of all ages, and reading every book on homiletics he can lay his hands on.

Out of the study he must make him-

self aware of the subculture and true needs of his congregation 'by meeting them as far as possible on their terms'. Other aspects of ministry fall within the responsibilities of the whole church, which with aggressive evangelism should expect to grow.

In the other three of these six chapters Macleod draws a clear distinction between the function of the preacher and the elders, the ministry to lay, and calling to the ministry.

Finally, in the seventh chapter, the Principal expresses his concern for the unity of the whole church as the one body of Christ, not a thousand bodies, whose splits owe their existence to nothing more honourable than clashes of personality.

Macleod recognises that some of the divisive issues such as monarchical episcopacy, and antipaeds baptism, and the Pentecostal charismatic movement seem insurmountable, but concludes 'the important thing now that churches which bear the marks (not perfectly but authentically) should wherever possible unite, and where that is not possible, stand together contending with one mind for the faith of the Gospel'.

Peter Cook, Alston, Cumbria.

The Angry Christian

Andrew D. Lester
Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
308pp. £15.76
ISBN 0-664-22519-5

'Anger as sin' is the unhealthy thought that Andrew Lester dispels. Anger is an essential mind – body response and therefore emotion intended to mobilise us to deal with threat. The book seeks an understanding of pastoral care that helps us to choose behaviour with anger as an ally.

Anger is a God-given capacity for survival which gives rise to attacking or defending behaviour. Today we acknowledge that we interpret experience uniquely. We agree some common threats to our survival, but every human psyche is moulded uniquely by infant and adult experiencing of the world. This self-structure is used to in-

interpret uniquely everything that happens.

How did anger become one of the seven deadly sins? Lester shows how we live within dominant 'stories' that shape us. So dominant stories, the separation of 'flesh and spirit' for example, became 'truth' to be lived. Alternative stories exist but can be out of our sight. Many interpreters of the Bible do not support that story. Anger is a human capacity that is necessary for survival and therefore of God. What should concern you is why you get angry and how you learn to express that emotion healthily. The book provides much which enables understanding of anger as a response to threat by the autonomic nervous system. The startled leap when frightened is unconscious; much of what gives rise to anger in us is also unconscious. Anger is personally embodied.

Lester pleads for pastoral care that aids self-awareness which is health promoting. Anger is a spiritually to locate internal awareness of our unique view of injustice or power abuse and provides the energy to determine a response that is constructive. Therefore not being angry is a failure of faith in our shared humanity. Modern object relations psychotherapy agrees: humanness comes from our need to relate to others. Ethical action that is loving, compassionate, resistant to abuse, and dedicated to non-violent confrontation needs anger and is essential to being human.

The theme is clearly thought out, is unnecessarily laboured at times, valuable for pastoral care givers but his *Coping with Your Anger* is simpler to grasp.

Peter Bowes, Edinburgh

Progressive Christians Speak

Edited by John B Cobb JR

Westminster John Knox Press, 314pp
ISBN 0-664-22589-6

This book started its life as a number of position papers of Progressive Christians Uniting. A committee rather than an individual wrote most of the chapters and this is fairly obvious as

you progress through the book. The areas dealt with are varied ranging from religion in public schools through to global food security. The purpose of the editor is to provoke the reader to think through the issues and there are some useful questions at the end of each chapter. At the start of the book a confession of faith is outlined and this helps show from where the different authors are coming theologically.

From a British perspective the book in several ways misses the mark and it is probably not that useful to the average reader. The book comes heavily from an American background – this is reflected in the topics covered and the illustrations used. Each chapter starts by outlining the main issues around the topic and this part of the chapter is the most useful section. The authors then go on to give a theological reflection and some practical applications. In both these areas the book falls down and leaves the reader unsatisfied.

The most disappointing aspect of the book is the lumping together of anyone who is conservative in his or her theology. There is little care taken to distinguish between theology and practice and to identify different groups even within the conservative right. What this book does show is the need for further theological thinking to be done around the area of ethics within a British context.

Jeremy Balfour, Edinburgh

Mission Shaped Church – A report from a working group of the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council

Church House Publishing, London,
2004. 164pp £10.95
ISBN 0 7151 4017 5

The report is obviously written in a Church of England context. Much of it can be put fairly well directly into a Church of Scotland context. Other issues, such as the role of the Bishop in mission, are not so directly applicable.

The findings are commended for study and discussion at diocesan, deanery and parish level. It is concerned

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with Church planting. This has a much wider context than the individual parish, and is suitable for use within a congregation when they are looking at a bigger picture. It is probably in the first instance of more direct relevance to National Mission Committees at Presbytery and Assembly level.

The opening chapter gives an excellent insight into changes of the cultural, social and spiritual context in recent years, and the challenge which that brings to the church to be relevant while also remaining true to the gospel. Mobility today means that geography no longer seems to be the primary basis of community, which is formed around network such as leisure, work and friendships.

Examples of a variety of new expressions of being church are given. These include: Café Church, Cell Church, Network-focussed churches, and a number of others. In the past these have often been seen as bridges, with the aim of getting people into the main church. However, are they not an equally valid expression of Church?

Many of the initiatives which have taken place involve activities crossing parish boundaries, or more than one type of church operating within a parish. The organisation and accountability require wider involvement than just the local church, as do the resources, particularly in terms of personnel and finance.

The report is very readable. It provides a challenge to the church about our vision for mission, and offers practical help. It reflects how thinking has changed in the light of experience, and seeks to remain true to the gospel.

Colin Strong, Edinburgh

The Rise of Evangelicalism

Mark A Noll

IVP, Leicester, 2004. 316pp. £16.99
ISBN 1-84474-001-3

This book was a delight to read. It is not often that one can say that of such a detailed work!

Subtitled 'The Age of Edwards,

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Whitefield and the Wesleys', this is the first volume of five (each by a different author) devoted to 'A History of Evangelicalism: People, movements and ideas in the English-speaking world', under the editorship of David Bebbington and Mark Noll. If the next four volumes match this introductory one in quality, the series must surely become a definitive resource for many years to come.

Despite the text moving between Britain, continental Europe and North America, and also spanning most of the eighteenth century, the reader is never left confused as to where geographically or chronologically the discussion is now located. Many threads weave together in an illuminating manner. The author is gracious but firm in highlighting weaknesses and wrong turnings alongside celebrating the work of God as the evangelical movement emerged in a variety of settings, both as a renewal movement within different denominations and also as the spiritual impetus to evangelise beyond their boundaries. Many of the themes Noll explores, such as the tension between Calvinist and Arminian 'wings' of early evangelicalism, the tendency to be conversionist and activist without matching theological reflection or deep worldview change – these and many more are very pertinent to us today.

Footnotes are plentiful but not intrusive. There is a 20-page bibliography, and a helpful index.

This book should be in all theological college libraries, but it will also warm the hearts and stimulate the minds of many serious Christian readers, keen to understand better the roots of our evangelical faith. I look forward to the further volumes in the series.

Rose Dowsett, Glasgow

Against the Stream

David W Smith

IVP, Leicester, 2003. 154pp. £7.99

ISBN 0 85111 793 7

Smith is giving a wake-up call to the church in the West regarding its mandate to missions in an age of globalisation. Over the past century there have been radical changes in societies around the world. The church worldwide has also changed – but does the church in the West realise that?

If the church in the West is again to make an impact, then it must listen to and learn from the ever expanding church in, well, most of the rest of the world. Smith gives a warning to the church in the UK; over the past century it has largely failed to confront difficult issues arising from society's move to secularism and materialism. Instead it has largely identified itself with this move.

A word of caution is given against hoping for revival to spread to the 'hard' places of the world just to get us 'off the hook', explaining how we can learn from present struggles between Western governments and Islamic nations; between Muslims and Christians (citing the example of Nigeria, which lies on the 'fault line' through Africa where Islam interfaces with Christianity). He suggests building bridges between faith communities, to help each other ward off secular market driven forces. As the church in the West divorces itself from secular powers and unites with the world-wide church, its integrity and effectiveness in mission will be greatly restored.

In other chapters he warns of misplaced motives, recalls times in history when the church in Europe has distorted the cross of Christ and emptied it of its power, even earning itself a reputation for being coercive and violent. (Surprised?)

Whereas we have gone soft, the church in the third world has had to wrestle with issues of poverty, sickness and oppression – and learned to fly above them (Is. 40: 25ff.).

There's much more in here to inform, inspire and challenge. I highly recommend you to get it, read it and refocus on your missionary calling.

James Milligan, Edinburgh

A Fragile Stone – the Emotional Life of Simon Peter

Michael Card

IVP, Leicester, 2003. 192pp. £9.99

ISBN 0 85111 785 6

Peter is remembered by many as the disciple who denied Jesus, the headstrong fisherman who was always 'opening his mouth and putting his foot in it'. Michael Card shows us that there is far more to this man than that, as he explores the emotional life of Simon Peter.

The book is divided into two parts: Part One – the Stone – deals with Peter as we read of him in the Gospels, and Part Two – the Bridge – speaks of Peter's ministry as recorded in Acts, and of the teaching in his two letters. The introduction has a useful list of facts about the disciple's life taken from the New Testament and also some probable truths about his later life from ancient sources.

In Part One Michael Card shows that there is more to know about a person than facts – we all have spiritual and emotional lives and the Bible reveals something of Peter's inner life. The Gospels make it clear that Peter was not merely a disciple, but a friend of Jesus, and this book examines different emotions which Peter experienced and how he was transformed as he walked with Jesus.

Part Two looks at the different aspects of Peter's life after Jesus' death and resurrection – preacher, healer, prisoner, reconciler, and writer – the Rock on whom Jesus was building his church.

A Fragile Stone is easy to read and should be of interest to all who would like to learn from the life of one who was such a close friend of Jesus. As the author said, 'The ultimate reason for getting to know Peter is so together we might better know Jesus'. It certainly helped me to see, in a new way, Peter's life as a whole – linking the disciple of the Gospels with the church leader of Acts and writer of two important letters.

Maureen Buwert, Wishaw